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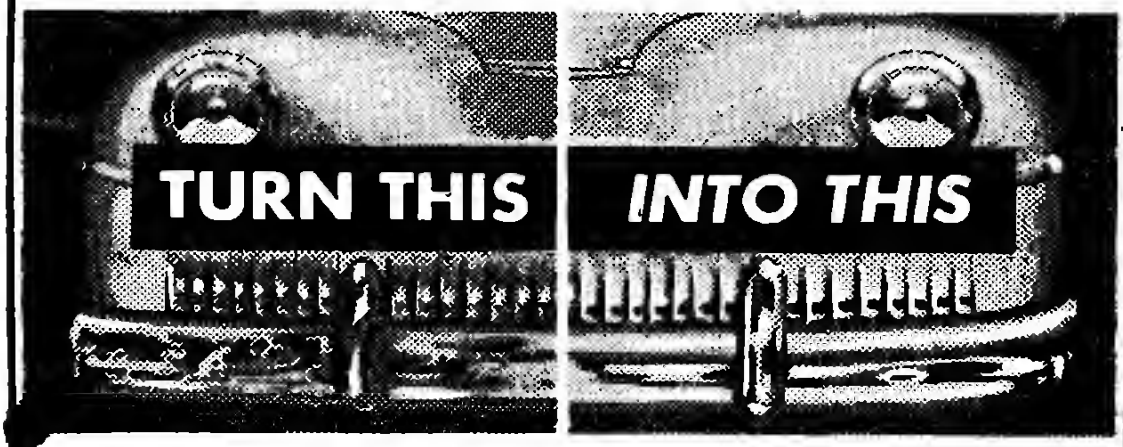

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AN EDITORIAL ON

. . . But It Could Happen!

Erik von Lhin's serial is coming to a close this time. And much os we've enjoyed it, we're frankly happy to see it end, since we've hod nothing but trouble with it. Still, we hope you'll agree with us ofter finishing this instollment that it was worth it. We think it's o dorned fine yorn.

Most reoders hove indicated they felt the same obout the previous parts. But they've sometimes raised the objection against the story that "it could have happened right here on Earth in the old days." Yep, it *almost* could hove done so, though it never did, quite. Such o degree of hopelessness on the part of the populotion and complete corruption in a seeming democracy never occurred to our knowledge, because it would toke special circumstances to create such a dependence on [redacted] city. This could be true on Mars, but not here.

However, our eyebrows go up at the idea that science fiction has to be something unrelated to the past. If we are going to stop printing stories thot could have happened here, then we'd better go out of business. Most of the stories you've liked best in this magazine *could* have hoppened. Some of them, with minor but all important differences, did.

By your votes, the best story we've printed wos "TEN TO THE STARS" by Roymond Z. Gallun. Well, we ogree. But that was simply the story of the type of people who go out to new frontiers. With changes, it could hove been the men who left Boston and New York to head into the wilds of Montano, Wyoming, etc. Thot's why it wos good—it hod the sweep and the drive thot is basic in the human onimal, and drives him on to new frontiers.

Mony of the other stories we've published could have happened on Earth, with certain significant changes. We don't like o Western story transplonted to Mars. But on the other hond, the basic plot of a lot of Western stories is not only o possible fromework for science fiction—it's the sort of thing thot inevitably will be the bosis for our future. People repeat endlessly, with endless voriotions.

It's in the adapting of the repetition to the variation of future developments and environments—not mere imitating, but altering to fit the new facts—that much of science fiction's best work has been done.

What is science fiction? We don't know, to be perfectly honest. Every definition we've seen has been one that would eliminate some of our favorite stories. But we know what it is not!

It isn't the type of story that *couldn't* have happened; it isn't a story based on the fallacy of the cults—that the use of science terminology in meaningless combinations produces great thoughts; it isn't a story which considers science something kind of magical and mysterious and not to be trusted. All those things have been tried in the past, and such pseudo-science is what you'll find in the cheaper so-called s-f movies and on the T-V set.

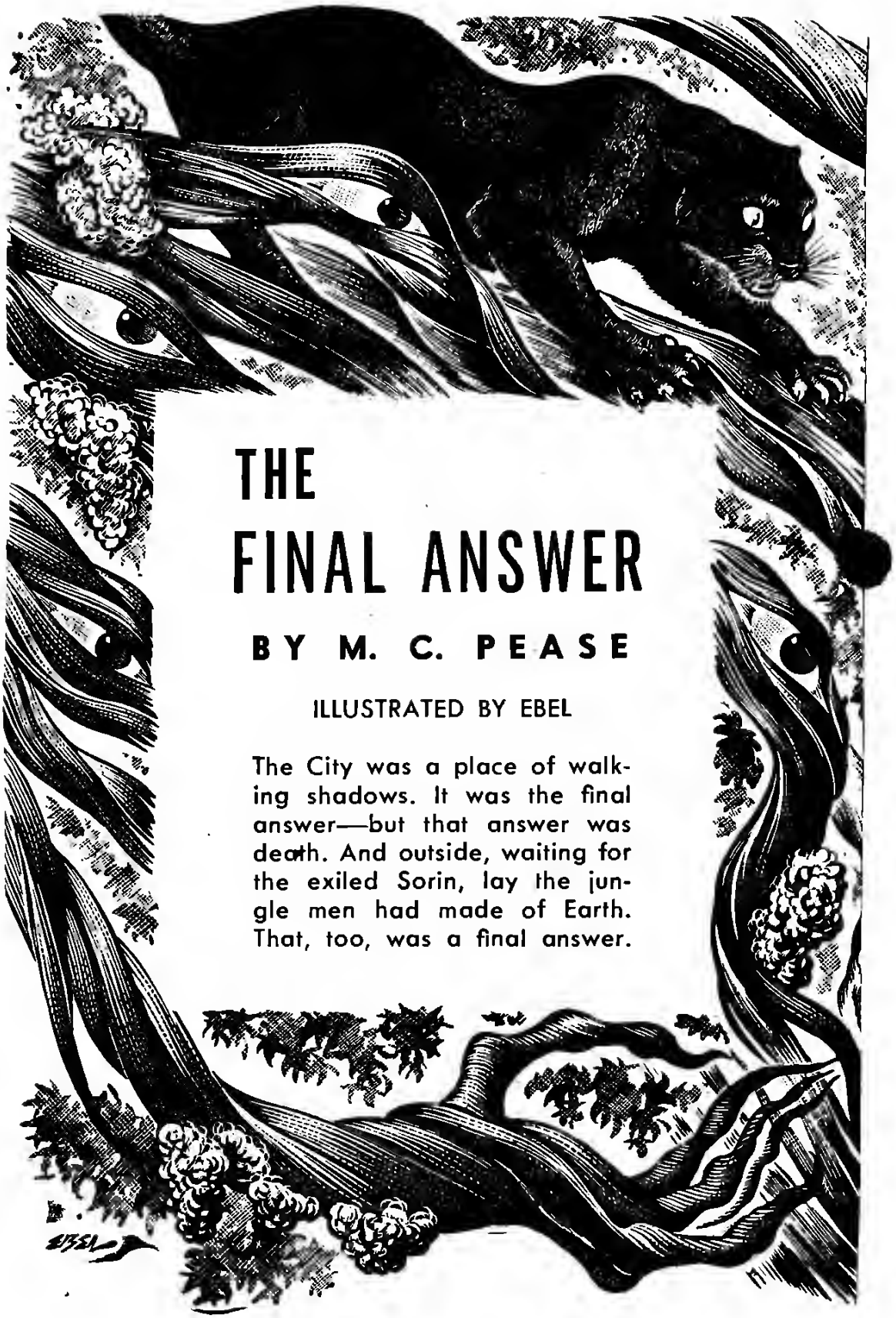
We're open to definitions of what you think science fiction is. If you've got a definition, by all means let us have it. But meantime, we're going to use our own definition here in this magazine, just as we've been doing in the past. To us, science fiction is that type of story which we've grown up on, which we prefer to all others, which somehow involves science or the future, or things beyond our present knowledge; and primarily, science fiction is any type of story which we consider the sort of story we'd like to read in a science-fiction magazine.

That is broad enough to cover everything!

Whether it's *good* science fiction or not is another matter; we have to leave that to your judgment. But unless you insist that we eliminate time-travel, we can't be rigidly scientific about things; and unless you don't want any story involving people behaving like people, you're almost certainly going to find some that could have happened here on Earth—with minor changes, of course.

To our way of thinking, William Atheling, Jr., outlined our attitude in his SKY HOOK, Spring 1953, when he wrote that he happened to dislike the tradition of naturalism in science fiction intensely, "but only as a matter of personal preference—it is a thoroughly respectable and important one and deserves to be explored." We also think science fiction is broad enough a field to include all other forms of literature, provided it is well and honestly done.

PHILIP ST. JOHN



THE FINAL ANSWER

BY M. C. PEASE

ILLUSTRATED BY EBEL

The City was a place of walking shadows. It was the final answer—but that answer was death. And outside, waiting for the exiled Sorin, lay the jungle men had made of Earth. That, too, was a final answer.

The three judges of the High Court of the City were black and grim. Their faces were closed and silent as they stared down from the bench at the girl who stood before them. Looking up at them, Sorin shuddered slightly, her eyes showing a hidden fear. But she said nothing and held her back straight and her head high. And she stared back at the Chief Justice. She stared at him until, with an abrupt gesture, he turned his head aside and nodded at the clerk. The Clerk, at the signal, rose from his chair at the desk below and to the side of the bench, pounding with his gavel as he did so to silence the people that crowded the spectator benches. "Silence in the Court," he intoned. "The High Court of the City is now in session. It has been summoned to consider the case of citizen 174 3295, known as Sorin. It has been convened to render judgment."

"Is said citizen present?"

"The citizen is present."

"Has the evidence of fact been abstracted? If so, let the abstract be read." The words were automatic for this was the ritual of the High Court.

The Clerk picked up a paper and read from it. "The abstract of the evidence of fact of citizen 174 3295, known as Sorin. Said citizen was born under certificate of authorization number 267 31 80 in accordance with due process of law. Her birth was recorded in maternity center number 843 on the 312th day of 13685. During the succeeding nineteen years she was assigned first to nursery number 7041, and then to development institution number 8307. She was trained as a historical ecologist with special reference to the era of catastrophic expansion in the pre-City age."

The Judge interrupted. "Wh[redacted] is this ecology?" he asked, [redacted] voice rasping. "An abstract of fact is supposed to be meaningful. If you load it with words that make sense only to a librarian, you are failing in your duty as Clerk of the Court." He glared.

The Clerk quailed under the blast. "If—if your Honor pleases," he said, "an ecologist is one who studies the relationship between different life forms, studies each plant and animal as it fits into its environment. A historical ecologist studies the records of the ecology that used to exist. This—this girl was an ecologist who specialized in the records of the . . ."

"Enough," the Judge roared. "It is not necessary to drag the thing out indefinitely. In the Clerk's function as an abstracter,

he is expected to be concise." His lips curled.

"Y-Yes, your Honor," the Clerk said. He hesitated. "This, then, was the training of the girl. However, at the recommendation of the Board of Monitors, Sub-Board 48, she was assigned to a Grade 2 job. Specifically, she was designated as a 'router' on the forty-third level, zone 93, position 707. In this position, she was to view the color of packages arriving on one conveyor belt. By moving a lever into the appropriate slot, she caused these packages to move out on various other conveyors. Her job was to so manipulate the lever that the packages would be segregated on the outgoing conveyors according to color. This it will be noted was a strictly menial job whose level is far below the level of her training. This was done to inculcate in her a sense of discipline and of submission to the Principle of the City. For the Board of Monitors, sub-Board 48, after reviewing her record and particularly the accumulated reports of her monitors during her formative period, which reports are on file, concluded that she was a potentially aberrant individual. Specifically, they found that she had exhibited an unbecoming persistence in asking questions. They suspected that she might develop an unwillingness to accept the established truths. And it was to prevent such a possible development that they recommended that she be disciplined with this job.

"As is customary with such cases, the girl was kept under surveillance in her assigned job. It quickly came to the attention of the City that she was failing to perform it properly. When the fact had become definitely established, she was interviewed—interviewer number 33406. The transcript of that interview is on record. In it, it is recorded that she admitted that she did in fact fail to do the job according to instruction. And, further, that failure was deliberate. It was her assertion that the job was meaningless, that the City could have done the sorting itself. She said, in fact, that this was proven by the lack of effect of her aberrant behavior. These comments, although they seem to have little bearing on the matter, are the only defense she has recorded for her actions.

"If it please the Court, such is the evidence of fact in the case of citizen 174 3295, known as Sorin, as abstracted by myself, in my capacity as Clerk of the High Court of the City." He sat down.

The Chief Justice leaned over the edge of the bench to peer at

the girl. His eyes were narrow and bright, and his mouth was thin and cruel. On the bench at his side a cat lay stretched out looking with sleepily cruel eyes at the girl. The Chief Justice's hand stroked the cat as he asked the girl, "You have heard the abstract of evidence of fact. Do you wish the clerk to elaborate on any point?"

The girl cringed slightly, and looked down. With a jerky motion, she shook her head. "No," she blurted.

"Very well," the Chief Justice said. His voice grated slightly and he smiled as he said it. "It is clear then that we have here a case of intrinsic mis-orientation. The girl is quite obviously in a non-emphatic relationship with the society of the City This is shown, not only by her early record, but, in a more positive way and one less susceptible to alternate interpretation, by her recent action. And it becomes even more clear if we look beyond the immediate action itself. Conceivably the citizen might have misinterpreted the directions given her. Possibly, she could have become—colorblind, or something of the sort. But the situation becomes unequivocal with her own explanation of her action. But perhaps the citizen would care to amplify for the Court the reasons for her action?" Once again he peered down at Sorin, looking like a predatory bird gauging its prey.

Sorin looked back up at him, and her eyes were wide. "But—but—it didn't mean anything. I mean—whether the boxes went here or there—why should I be put to work doing something like that?—I've been trained as an ecologist. To study the relation of plants and animals to their environment. Can't I ask questions about that? Can't I try to make some sense out of what the City does to us?"

The Justice looked grim. "And perhaps the citizen will explain to us why it should be expected to make sense to her. She will observe that the function of the City is to preserve the society of the City. We do not find it astonishing that the actions of the City should fail to be completely intelligible to the citizen of the City. Does the citizen disagree?"

Sorin sighed. "Yes, I disagree," she said. She sounded very tired. "I think I have the right to know. I think if I have got the intelligence to ask the question, I have got the right to an answer. But this is my own opinion." She fell silent.

"Is there anything more the citizen wishes to say?" the Chief

Justice asked after a bit, "before the Court renders judgment?"

She raised her head, her eyes closed as if to hold out the reality. With a conscious effort she opened them. "Yes," she said. "There are many things I want to say. But I don't suppose they're worth saying. You wouldn't understand anyway. So go ahead and render your judgment."

The Chief Justice leaned first to the one side, and then to the other, to gather the brief opinions of his colleagues. There was little discussion for the Chief Justice was the only one of the three with force of will. But he had a sense of timing and was aware of the rows of curious watchers. And always he carefully consulted them while the watchers waited. Finally he straightened up and stared, first over the rows of faces, then at Sorin. "Now hear this," he said, "it is the unanimous opinion of this court that you have demonstrated yourself to be incompatible with the Purpose of the City. You have exhibited a will to independent action without regard for the basic welfare of the City and of the society contained within the City. We therefore find it necessary to deprive you of your rights as a citizen." There was a sensual pleasure in his voice as he rolled the words out. "In accordance with the established precedents in similar cases, and acting by virtue of the authority granted this Court by the Laws of the City, and so that you may have no further opportunity to interfere with the operation of the City, we hereby direct that you be excluded from the City." A whispering wind went through the audience, a sigh of pleased morbidity. The Chief Justice gave no hint that he heard, except that he paused until it was finished.

"It is recognized by this Court," he continued in a lower voice when the room was once more quiet, "that the judgment placed upon you by this Court is in effect a sentence of death. It is an acknowledged fact that none can live in the jungle outside the City. By excluding you, we are, in fact, forcing you into the jungle—and, therefore into death. The Court desires to be merciful, however. The Court has no wish to deprive you of life as well as of citizenship. The Court does, therefore, grant you the opportunity to remain within the City." He leaned back, a vulturine look on his face as he waited for her response. He waited for her to take the bait.

Sorin looked at him. She knew it was a trap, but she could not help asking: "What do I have to do?"

The Chief Justice briefly licked his lips. He leaned forward. "The Court calls your attention to the fact that it has excluded you from the City for the sole purpose of preventing your further interference with the proper operation of the City." His voice was smooth. "So long as that purpose is fulfilled—if we can be assured that you will not prejudice the Purpose of the City—then we will have no wish to send you to the death that must await you."

"Oh, I promise, I promise!" Sorin cried.

The Chief Justice's eyes lit up. "Promises are insufficient," he said. "No, we must be sure that you will not cause further damage. And we can be sure only if you will allow yourself to be desensitized." He smiled, his lips thin and cruel.

Sorin sagged. She had known it. Deep within her she had known that this was what he meant. Desensitization! An innocent euphuism for the killing of a mind. She had seen desensitized people. Eyes vacant. Unmoving until ordered to move. Unthinking. Unalive. This was what he offered her. Death in the body in the jungle, or death in the mind in the City. What was the choice? What difference did it make? She felt weak with a profound discouragement, and nearly fell.

"What is your choice?" the Chief Justice asked. "Life, or death? For the choice is yours. The law prohibits our making the decision for you. We confess that we do not understand ourselves the reason why. But we acknowledge the fact that we cannot extend to you this mercy of the Court without your own express consent. We cannot order you to live. We can only offer you the opportunity." His eyes watched her intently. His mouth was curled in an expression of sadistic amusement. His voice was smooth and bland.

Sorin closed her eyes. She swayed as if about to fall. Her mouth was open and she gasped for air. With a quick panic, she looked around but there was no escape. And then, she straightened up. Her eyes became steady and she tossed her hair back with a gesture of defiance. "I decline the mercy of the Court," she said, her voice clear and steady. And she turned and walked with a sure step to the Bailiff of the Court.

The Chief Justice looked as if he had been hit. His mouth was half open and he stared after her. "But out there is the jungle," he cried. "No one can live in the jungle." The very thought shocked him. But Sorin

gave no hint she heard, and his shock turned into rage. His face grew red and his lips drew back. "You refuse the mercy of the Court?" he thundered. Sorin made no move but stood watching the Bailiff. "You will listen to me," he shouted. "You will show some respect for the Court and answer when we speak."

Sorin turned slowly, her eyes veiled, her head proud. "I will show no respect for the court," she said, her voice slow and measured. "By the Court's order I am no longer a citizen of the City. The Court no longer has the right to demand my respect. And neither does it have it." She turned away again.

The Chief Justice was dumbfounded. There was a long silence as he stared at the girl. His eyes shifted and he looked down. "The Court has spoken," he mumbled. "Take her away." His voice rose in sudden panic and he half lifted from his seat. "Take her away." And as the Bailiff led her off, Sorin heard him lapse once more into incoherent muttering.

The Keeper of the Gate had an unpleasant job. In effect, he was the public executioner of the City. But even more, he was the member of the City who was closest of them all to the jungle. Others could live inside the walls, knowing the jungle only as the ultimate nightmare. But he kept the Gate, the doorway to the jungle. And the City's people feared him almost as they feared the jungle itself.

He dwelt in a small room, part of the Gate itself. There was a door at its far end. A massive door with huge, bolt-studded hinges. Nowhere on it was there any handle, and by this fact as much as by any other, Sorin knew it to be the Gate itself, knew that on its other side lay her exile and, by all accounts, her death. She shuddered.

At its near end, there was another door in the wall, the small one through which the Bailiff had pushed her. It, too, had no visible handle on it, and she knew that those who came in here were doomed. The big and massive door was the Gate itself, but the little door was equally as effective. He who came through it had no choice left but to stay in the Gate or to go outside.

On the two long sides of the room, up near the tops of the walls, were windows through which the people of the City could watch and see that the orders of the Court were obeyed. As Sorin entered, shoved in with little ceremony by the Bailiff of the Court, faces crowded these windows. Inhuman faces, they

seemed to her. Faces empty of all sympathy, not recognizing any bond of kinship with her. Less friendly even than the small dog that one carried in his arms. She stared back at them. These were her real executioners, she briefly thought. Not the Keeper of the Gate or the Bailiff who did but do what they were told. Not even the Justice of the Court for all his sadistic glee at finding a new victim. But the people. The citizenry of the City. The sum total of all the humans in it who dared not see the City questioned lest they themselves become devoid of meaning. Which was the most nearly dead, she wondered. She herself who stood at the Gateway to the jungle, exiled from the only place where humans could live? She who stood face to face with death because she had asserted her own individuality even at the expense of the City? Or these? These so-called humans who dared not see their City, their way of life, called into question? Whose only claim to life was as a single unidentifiable speck, submerged in the City, acknowledging that their only significance was as a part of the City? Which, she wondered, were the most nearly dead?

When the girl was thrown inside, the old man who was the Keeper looked up with interest from the table where he sat writing in a book. With courtesy he got to his feet, closing the book and shoving it aside. He smiled at her and bowed. "How do you do?" he said. His words were slightly slurred as if he was somewhat out of practice talking. He motioned to a chair on the far side of the table. "Will you sit and have a glass of wine?" he asked. "I would be delighted if you would." He looked as if he meant it. It occurred to Sorin that he must be a very lonely man. And so she smiled and did as he invited. "To you," he said, after he had served her and himself, and raised his glass in toast. "So they're throwing you out?" he asked when he had finished. "What happened? Did you start thinking?"

"Something like that," she admitted.

"Oh, that's bad, that's bad," he said, shaking his head. "Only way to live in here is not ever to think. Because even if you do start thinking, what have you got to think about?"

"What do you mean?" Sorin came alert. If he was dissatisfied, maybe he would help her, she thought.

"What do I mean?" he said, vaguely but bitterly. "Look at it." He waved at the bleak walls of the room. "What is it? I'll tell you what it is. It's the place

of the walking shadows; that's what it is. A place for men to exist until the day comes when they have forgotten they ever had a soul. And that day is not far ahead."

"You don't think the City is the final answer?" Sorin asked, probing for his views.

"Yes, it is," he asserted. "But the final answer is death. We're through. The human race is through. Outside there, there's something brewing, I don't know what. But it's what is going to take man's place on this fair earth. Because mankind's finished. He has walled himself up in here hoping at least to be able to die in peace. And probably he will. But that's all he will do. This is a tomb, the graveyard of man's hopes."

"What can be done about it?" she asked, her eyes alert and watchful.

"Nothing." He chopped the word off short. "Outside there the fire beam sweeps past every five minutes. When it comes by, it sears all life out of the very ground for a strip a quarter of a mile wide. That's what it takes to keep the jungle out of the City. Out beyond that quarter mile lies hell itself. That is what our honored ancestors left us. They thought that they could build the world over, adjusting evolution to their own demands. But it got away from them. It got out of control. And it destroyed them. The only thing that they could salvage was the City. The few square miles of its extent is all that's left of their proud dominion. And, mind you, they knew what they were doing. They had their mighty engines. They were the masters of all sorts of subtle energies. And *they* were beaten. Beaten back behind the walls of the City. What hope is there for us? We who only live here, and are not even masters of the City?"

"Don't you think we should be masters of the City?" she suggested.

"Why? What good would it do?" he answered.

"What good does it do to do nothing?" she countered. "If we were masters at least we would be fighting. Maybe we could do something."

"No," he said. "All we could do is make ourselves uncomfortable. The human race is dying here, but there are a lot worse ways that it could die. No, if you want to do something, you're the one that's got the chance to do it. The problem's out there, not in here. Master the jungle and the City doesn't matter. But just mastering the City, that wouldn't do anything. No, you've got to go out and beat it first. Then come back if you

want, and batter down the gates of the City." He chuckled in a twisted way that had no humor in it.

She leaned toward him. "But don't you see . . . ?"

"No," he snarled. "I know what you want. But I wouldn't be here if the City didn't trust me to do its dirty work. It trusts me, and I am the executioner of its victims and my only consolation is that I am also the recorder of its death." He pounded on the book in which he had been writing.

He got up, picking up his book, and walked to the back of the room. There he reached up to a small cabinet in the wall. With a deliberateness that she barely noticed as she sat thinking, he opened it. With a sudden shock she saw a switch within it and, in a moment of blind clarity, she knew the time had come and that there was nothing she could do. "When I pull this," he said, his voice calm and almost conversational, "a force field will be set up between us. When the fire beam next sweeps by outside, the outer Gate will open. You will then have the full five minutes until the beam comes round again. Just before it does come by again, the Gate will close. Please do not still be here. Because after it is closed, the space will be flooded with a radiation much the same as that of the beam, and I do not like to have to dispose of half-charred bodies. If you must die, at least, I beg you die outside. Are you ready?"

She gazed at him in horror. There was something implacable about him that killed all hope. He was not sane, she knew, and there was no chance at all that she could dodge the sentence that lay upon her—the sentence of exile and of death. And so she nodded and watched him pull the switch.

When the Gate swung open, she stood up slowly. Outside, there was a strip of utter and complete desolation, burned bare until the soil itself was dead. Beyond, there was a wall of solid greenness that towered into the sky with opaque lushness. The jungle! Symbol of the ancient error of those who once had been masters of the Earth. The torrent of savage life that they, in their blindness had once let loose, and that had driven them back behind the walls of their own City, entombing them there between these walls of greenness.

Sorin got up and walked out the Gate. The Earth was hard beneath her feet, quite different from the padded floors of the City. And the sun beat down upon her with unaccustomed

warmth. The air smelled sharp and almost painful, for she knew neither the smell of the jungle nor the twang of the ozone left behind by the fire beam that twinkled far to her left. She was alone, and she did not understand the world. And when she was about half-way across the strip, the full force of it hit her. Suddenly her face crumpled into panic. She gave a formless gasp and her hands twisted into balls. Crouching, she turned from the green unknown before her. Her foot lifted and she poised in an attitude of running.

But she did not run. With a visible effort of will power, she stopped. Her foot went down and she straightened up. Her face lost its look of fear and became something else again. And slowly, she raised her fist and shook it at the City. And shaking back her hair in final defiance, she turned once more towards the jungle and, with a calm deliberation that masked a tension shown only by her face, she moved once more towards it.

Knowing no way to pick one spot rather than another, she chose a tree at random and walked to it. She started to push her way into the wild profusion that grew there, when suddenly she stopped. Why she stopped, she did not know. It was just that this was not the place. Not the place at all. There was danger here. Danger far beyond the normal of the jungle. She knew it and she drew back from it.

With puzzlement, Sorin looked up and down the wall of greenness. Why was one place better than another? Now that she was back away from it, it made no sense. She knew it made no sense. And yet the remembered feeling was so strong that there was no point in trying again at that same spot. She backed away.

Down, far to her right, there was a twinkling on the ground. It was the fire beam and it was sweeping around to scorch the earth around the City. It was the fire beam and it would force her to decision. With a rapid stride Sorin started to walk to her left along the edge of the jungle. Where should she turn into it? Why was one place better than another? What was the clue that she should find? Panic took her with sudden fury as, shudderingly, she looked over her shoulder at the approaching flame, and she began to run. Her breath began to come in short gasps and she felt weak. And then, without knowing why or being conscious of decision, she stumbled in behind a tree and lay gasping on the ground. The blue flame of the fire beam swept past the spot where she lay pant-

ing. She heard it pass as it went by with a sigh of menace and of death. She felt it with the sudden tension of the air and the prickling of her skin. She saw it as the leaves of the jungle around her curled back in pain, as death swept across the face of the jungle

When it was gone, she got up and looked around her. The towering trees, the interlaced tendrils, the birds that screamed across the spaces, all were unfamiliar to her. This was the deadly jungle, the fearful thing of nightmares, the live destroyer of man's ancient civilization. This was the green flood that the builders of the City at the full height of their powers had been unable to stem except in the isolated area of the City itself What was there here, Sorin wondered, that was so overpowering? It was like the gardens of the City. More crowded, more varied, without the discipline of care, but basically not different to her eye. She did not understand. She knew, for she had been told, that this was the jungle. This was the creation of man. Wanting a more plastic nature, and an environment more responsive to his touch, man had let loose the full power of adaptation. With the playful unthinkingness of a child with a toy, he had let loose on the earth energies that made each plant and animal completely responsive to environment. Only later did he wake to find the measure of his disaster. For the plants grew without control. They soon adapted to the means that he devised to control them. Chemicals? The plants learned to use the most violent of man's chemicals as fertilizer. Fire? The trees drew warmth and energy from the flames. Only the energies of the fire beam proved irresistible, and that only if it kept hammering in and in on a steady beat. And, though Sorin could only sense it, even that seemed to be failing Where once the strip around the City had been a mile wide, it now was but a quarter of that. And under the surface of the ground, streamers had long since reached the City's walls. Already they had explored the cradle of metal on which the City rested. Already they had learned that there was energy to be had, energy to sustain their drive for life. Energy that could be used to grow with Over the years they had learned that that energy could be gained quite simply with the use of a small amount of acid. And there were spots in the subterranean walls of the City that were hardly more than a tenth of their original thickness. The might of the jungle was such that even

the City was doomed. This was the jungle, but Sorin could not see the worst of it.

The jungle was strange to the girl. It was something beyond her experience. But there was nothing visibly hostile about it, nothing to measure to the childhood nightmare that it had always been. In sudden release from that nightmare, she laughed and, reaching out, she broke off a branch from a nearby bush in token defiance. It was with somewhat amused interest that she saw the remaining branches of the bush curl back away from her. And, with a careless toss of her head, she moved on into the jungle.

She was perhaps twenty feet into the shadows of the jungle when she heard a rustle alongside her. She stopped and peered into the shade. Her eyes could not penetrate the gloom, especially since she did not know what she looked for. But there was a pair of gleaming eyes there, she saw. The animal did not look large, and she felt only curiosity about it. She began to circle around it, trying to get a better view. And as she circled, she quite unconsciously moved closer.

The animal moved out to meet her. It was not large. A foot high, perhaps at the shoulders. It was long, with a sleek, smooth tail and a pointed nose. An antiquarian might have recognized it as the overgrown and probably highly dangerous descendant of the weasel, but Sorin thought it was cute and reached out her hand to pat it.

As she did, there was a sudden streak of blackness from the left. The weasel snapped to meet it and, for just a moment, the tableau froze. For the blackness was a cat, a huge cat, a cat three feet high with claws that stretched out and whose teeth were bared and vicious looking. And then the picture dissolved in twisting fury. The battle was silent and blinding fast. And in the moment it was over as the black panther snapped the body of his lifeless enemy through the air and looked about him with a snarl.

Sorin stood frozen, shocked into complete passivity. At the very moment when the jungle had seemed most friendly to her, it had exploded into battle. The change left her stunned and she stood frozen, staring at the cat. And the panther stared back at her.

Then, once again, panic swept over her. With a sob she whirled and started running. Stumbling blindly over roots and vines, she could almost feel the claws upon her back. And when she finally tripped, falling flat upon the

ground, she lay there waiting for the final agony. It was about five minutes before it finally penetrated to Sorin that she was still alive. The thought came as a shock to her and she lay still, trying to puzzle it out. But there was no sense to it that she could see. And it was this lack of sense more than anything that had happened that brought in on her the fact that she had no knowledge at all of this new life. She was as a baby here. All her training, all the rules of reference of her life meant nothing here. The learning that she had, the training in ecology, meant nothing, for it taught the bookish facts. It did not even tell her when she was in danger and when not. The odds she faced were overwhelming. Physically untrained, emotionally unprepared, mentally in total ignorance, she was helpless before the jungle. The blackness of despair swept over her.

When finally she struggled to a sitting position, it was still to hold her head in her hands, trying to keep herself oblivious to all the strangeness about her. And it was some minutes before she found in herself the courage once more to face the jungle. When finally she did raise her head and start to look around, she suddenly tensed. There, not more than thirty feet away, sat the black panther, calmly licking his paws, stopping every few moments to look around with his yellow slit eyes. He looked at her with them, and she felt the panic rise up within her. It was only with the greatest of efforts that her will power prevailed and was able to keep her instincts from sending her once more in headlong flight. She balled her fists and shrank into herself, closing her eyes and fighting for control. And when she thought she had it in at least some slight measure, she got to her feet, carefully keeping her eyes away from the big cat. And she began to walk, slowly, into the jungle, while the sweat poured off her face and her hands twisted by her sides.

When she had gone a little distance, she stopped and leaned against a tree. She hung her head and her breath shuddered out. She had to look and yet she could not bear to see. But, as if it were not truly part of herself, her head came up and turned to her right, looking to see where was the cat. And some part of her was not really surprised to see him, about twenty feet away, stretched out and licking his paws, making more perfect his black and shining coat.

She pushed herself away from the tree with trembling hands, and, with hesitant step, once

more began to walk. This time she watched the panther. She saw him get up, lazily stretching his shoulder muscles as he did so. And she watched him as, without a single glance at her, he paralleled her route. It was only because he gave no overt sign of interest in her that she was able to keep down the panic in her. She knew that if he just once should glance her way, then she could not help but run. Run blindly, unseeing, in an agony of fear, until she dropped from pure exhaustion. But he did not glance her way. Except that he did not change his position from her by more than a foot or a few degrees, there was no sign at all that the cat was aware of Sorin.

She could not have said how long it was that she walked through the jungle. Time ceased to have meaning for her. In her state of arrested panic, she knew no time. Each moment was the present and that was all. Each moment was a unit filled by the step before her and the sleek black killer thirty feet to her right. Time passed and the trees of the jungle were each like each other.

Before her stretched a tangled barrier of bushes. Dark and gloomy, it twisted to either side. There was no obvious way around the barricade, so she prepared to try to push her way through. Why she should, she could not say. It was simply that her mind had set a course. Having no other frame of reference but that course, she accepted it as purpose. There was no thought that she should not continue on.

She peered into the bushes looking for the least difficult approach. As she did, she suddenly heard the big cat spit beside her. Her eyes wide with fright she twisted towards him, half crouched to run. But he was not spitting at her. His eyes were on the bushes. His lips were curled back. And one paw at a time, he moved forward, slowly.

Suddenly, he exploded into action. Like a streak, he moved in front of her, intercepting a small furry thing that had come darting out of the bushes. With a high squeal, the monkey thing died beneath one paw of the cat. But where the one had been, there were now five, then ten, then twenty, swarming out of the bushes. They died beneath the claws of the cat and they died, ripped by his teeth. They twisted brokenly through the air as he batted them. But one got on his back and its claws reached for his eyes while others tried to get around him. He rolled with savagely snapping

jaws and the one on his back was gone, but there were others reaching for him, and he leaped to escape them.

There was a pause, a moment while the monkey things regrouped, staring at the cat with bloodshot eyes. The panther stood quietly, watching them, his black tail swaying gently back and forth. The panther looked up at the girl where she stood rooted to the ground. And suddenly he snarled and twitched his shoulders at her. She jumped, the spell broken, and began to run. Behind her she heard once more the shrieks of the monkey things as they again took up the fight.

She had gone perhaps fifty yards away from the scene of battle, when suddenly she was pitched forward as one of the monkey things jumped on her back. She felt its clawlike hands dig into her shoulders, and she could sense that he was shifting around even as she fell, seeking to free one arm and hand for the kill. She remembered the way another had reached for the panther's eyes and she closed hers tight in a feeble instinct of protection. As she hit the ground, she reached around behind her neck to try to get the thing. She felt a hairy arm reach under her, through, and around her throat. She brought her arm back, but in some remote segment of her mind, she knew it was too late.

At that moment, even as she recognized her own death, she felt the hairy arm jerked off her neck. She felt claws scrape across her back, and then the weight was gone. She was free. She rolled over wondering what had happened.

She found herself staring up at a blood-stained mouth filled with teeth that were long and sharply pointed teeth. And she heard a growl, deep and menacing. Over her there stood a wolf-like animal, snarling his menace at the monkey things crawling around them. Wolf or dog, he was a savage-looking beast and she was glad that his attention at the moment was on the monkey things that threatened to surround them. The half hysterical thought occurred to her that there was some advantage in having so many different things fighting over her. Perhaps, by the time that they had the possession of her all settled between them, she would be so worn down as not to be worth eating.

As she lay there, watching, wondering what the dog-wolf would do when the monkey things had them surrounded, there was a sudden explosion of fury. The panther had returned,

a black shadow of vengeance. With motions too quick for the eye, he slashed through the circle of monkey animals With a cacophony of squeals, they scattered. Returning to the bushes from which they had come, they turned to hurl their defiance at the cat, daring him to follow them into their own habitat. But with a disdainful air, he turned and loped to one side Lying down without a look at the bushes, at her, or even at the dog-wolf, he began to groom his fur, smoothing down the signs of combat.

Sorin looked at the cat. She was astonished. Why, she wondered, was he willing to fight the monkey things but paid no attention to the wolf-like animal? Did he just like to fight them? With a start, she wondered where the wolf-thing was Looking around, she saw that he had moved over under a bush a short distance away with the carcass of one of the monkey things and was calmly gorging himself. Between gulps, his head would come up, glancing at her and around at the jungle. But this, apparently, was a reflex of caution. It was obvious that he had no immediate interest in anything beyond his meal.

Sorin pushed herself up sitting. She sat there, slowly and painfully trying to piece the thing together, knowing that all her old rules and knowledge of life had no meaning here For the panther should be her enemy, seeking in her only a possible dinner. And yet the cat had acted in her defense. Whether it had actually been the cat's purpose to protect her or not, she did not know, but at least this had been the effect

And the dog-like animal, by all her rules, should have been a hunter, too A ruthless killer of the jungle. But he had made no threat at her. In fact, he too, had, with purpose or without, acted in her defense. This did not fit with what she would have expected

But most of all, there was the fact that the dog and cat paid no attention to each other. Down through all the ages, there had been antipathy between the dogs and cats Wherever they had met, there had been, at most, an armed truce. But here, in the jungle, they had, for purpose or not, worked together to protect her. And, that purpose, if it was a purpose, accomplished, they showed no signs of hostility towards or even interest in each other.

This was the jungle Created by man as he let loose the unrestrained forces of adaptation Had the dog and cat adapted to each other, she wondered? Ap-

parently they had. But why should they? It was said that the adaptation of the jungle was towards viciousness, towards more efficient killing and for cunning, not for friendliness. Why should the dog and cat have adapted to at least a tolerance of each other? What did they have in common?

Suddenly, she knew the answer. She could not have proven it logically, but she knew it by intuition, and there was no doubt in her that she was right. It all fitted. It was a pattern that she must accept.

She did not stop to fully analyze the pattern. She simply got to her feet. A moment of doubt swept over her, and she hesitated. But then, with the thought that she had little to lose anyway, she walked over to the black panther. Kneeling, she put her hand on his head, a last minute trembling as she did. "You are my friend, aren't you?" she said in a quiet voice.

The panther raised his head and looked at her with his unreadable slit eyes. And in her head, she heard him answer her question: "Not particularly."

"Oh?" she asked, verbally, somewhat taken aback by what his method had been, although not by the fact of an answer. "But then, why . . . ?"

"I am the friend of Kin," she heard within her mind. "And Kin would be a friend of yours." There was a feeling of finality as if the subject had been exhausted. And the big cat resumed licking his fur.

"Kaylee is efficient," another voice said in her mind—a much more friendly voice, but one that spoke of power and courage and strength. She turned to look at the wolf, knowing that it was he who spoke. The dog had stopped eating and was looking at her. "In fact, he is very efficient. But he is not polite. In fact, he has no desire at all to be polite. But don't let it bother you. He isn't polite to me either. Or to Kin, for that matter."

"I see," Sorin said, wondering what it was she saw. "But who, or what, is Kin?"

"Kin?" the mental voice answered. "Why Kin is one of us. A hunter. Together with Mortrey, we four are a team and we are strong. As to what he is, why he is a man, of course. A man like you. Except for certain minor differences." The voice chuckled.

Sorin was startled. And yet, she knew that this must be so. This was the pattern she had seen intuitively. A dog and a cat have in common only their association with man. And therefore the adaptation of these animals to the jungle must have been of

a form to strengthen that association if it left them together at all. And therefore there must be a man in it. And that this association was telepathic in its nature she had known, too, because she had felt it. She had felt it without knowing what she felt. For one of these, probably the cat, had warned her off from where she first had started to enter the jungle. He had told her that the place was dangerous, and she had heard. She had heard and backed away and called it just blind hunch. But in her subconscious mind, she had known the message for what it was, and accepted it as such. This was the pattern that she had seen if only partly and without explicit analysis. And yet she was startled.

"Why should you be? Mind-talk is not strange," the dog's voice said in her mind. "You'll find stranger things than this in the jungle." And as she thought about it in some segment of her mind that was free from shock, that still functioned as a trained ecologist, she knew that it was so. Telepathy, in the ordinary course of evolution, would have no chance. In the beginning, it would not be a helpful thing. Even if two animals are not hunting each other, they are at least competing for the same food. Anything one can read from the other's mind, he can use to his own advantage. It is only when telepathy gets to the point where the subjects feel so close that they are not competitors that it starts becoming an advantage. And in ordinary evolution, if an evolutionary line develops something that is a disadvantage until it is highly developed, the whole line gets chopped off short before it gets beyond the critical point. The Law of the Survival of the Fittest will not give it time to develop. It was only in this jungle where adaptation was too fast, where change occurred too rapidly for the selection of the fittest, that telepathy could have a chance. It was not strange, therefore, that telepathy had developed in this jungle.

She looked at the dog-wolf, and a strange thing happened. Where before it had been the face of an animal—a possibly friendly one, but still an animal—she suddenly found that in her mind it had become a face of intelligence. She felt a sudden bond of kinship, and although she knew it derived from the telepathic link, yet it found expression in the way her eyes interpreted what they saw. She looked at the cat, Kaylee, and saw that it was true there, too. On Kaylee's face she read a bored and almost disdainful

aloofness, but with a keen awareness and a subtle understanding that was, to her, a wholly human characteristic. She laughed, amused at herself.

"And this Kin," she said a moment later, "where is he?"

"He is coming," the dog-wolf said. "In your panic you ran the wrong way. Also, he got tangled up with a . . ." The final word was unintelligible to her. With no previous knowledge on her part, it had no verbalization to her. She had a fleeting image of a long white worm of huge proportion, and an awareness of an odor that raised the hair on her neck. She did not ask for more. "He is, as a matter of fact, here now," the voice went on.

With a start she was suddenly aware of a presence behind her. She turned. There stood a man. He was young and finely muscled. His eyes were dark and piercing, and she knew they had, with one quick glance, absorbed the whole of her. She tried to find what he was like. The thing she chiefly sensed was that he belonged. He was in tune with the jungle. He knew the ways of the jungle and knew how to survive in it. He was a part of it. There was an air of competence about him that was undeniable. An air of fitness and of justifiable self-confidence. Here was a man, wholly unafraid of the jungle, not defying it, making no attempt to master it, taking what he wanted from it, and above all, adapting to it. He was alive. Vitally alive. Alive in a way and to an extent not known at all to those of the City. For he had adapted, and by adapting, he had conquered. She was afraid of him.

With impassive eyes, the man stepped forward into the clearing. On his left shoulder was a bird of brilliant plumage who watched her with bright eyes. As they came forward, the man's mind reached out for her, and spoke to her: "I am Kin. Kaylee and Torg you have met. This, on my shoulder, is Mortrey. We four are hunters. I would be pleased if you would travel with us until the Tolath decides what should be done with you."

Sorin looked at him. There was a sense of unreality in her. This man, or boy, was something that was alien to her, beyond her knowledge and experience. And yet, in her feeling toward him, there was also a sense of overwhelming relief. After the terror of her first experience in the jungle, after the strangeness of finding allies in a panther and a wolf, he at least was human. There was something alien about him. Something that to her was not human, but he had a human form. "Thank you," she said to him. "This—this jungle—I have

no way at all of knowing even what it is. The more I see of it, the more I know that. Those that I expect to find my enemies, turn out to be my friends." She indicated Torg and Kaylee. "And the things that look innocent and friendly in it, I find are deadly. Without your help, there is nothing I can do."

"So?" Kin's thought cut in. "You have our help. You will come with us." He seemed slightly embarrassed by her thought-words.

"Yes, of course," she said. "But I do want you to know how grateful I am for your help. Why you are doing it, I do not know. All I know is that you are, and that by doing it, you are giving me a chance to live. A chance to survive until I can get back to the City."

"The City?" He seemed surprised. "You expect to get back to the City? Why?"

"Of course." She, in her turn, seemed surprised at his questions. "The City is my life."

"But the City threw you out," he said.

"Yes." She seemed sad. "They have lost their way. No longer do they know what the purpose of the City is. They have forgotten that the City is to keep alive a kernel of the power of mankind. To keep the spark from finally going out. And in their forgetting, they are afraid. They have come to think that the purpose of humanity is to serve the City, and that is wrong. And it is because of that wrongness that they have thrown me out. They have forgotten how to live. I must go back."

He stared at her. "Why?"

She blinked at him, not quite grasping what his question meant. "Why? But they are wrong. They are afraid. Their whole existence is based on the nightmare of the jungle. Everything they do is based on that one thought. When I go back, they will see that it is foolish. That the jungle, even though it threatens, still is not quite the overwhelming thing they think it is. They'll see that a person can live in it. I'll tell them about the help that I have had, but that won't change it. That simply means that they should learn about the jungle. That they can learn about it. And when they see me, they will know that they were wrong."

"But why bother?" he asked.

She frowned at him, trying to see what he meant. "You don't think I should? I don't know. It seems to me I have to. That not to go back would be very wrong. That I owe it to them. And maybe to myself. They're wrong, you see, and I can prove to them they are. If I don't, or if some-

body doesn't, the whole purpose of the City must fail. Because they can't continue much longer just being parts of the machine. Or soon that will be all they can be, and then the machine will fail. I don't know, maybe I shouldn't. But I am still a human being. I am still a part of the human race. And this still means something to me."

It was Kin's turn to be silent a moment while he studied her. Finally he asked with a puzzled air: "I'm not human?"

She laughed, warm-heartedly. "Of course you are," she said. "But that isn't what I mean. The point is that man was once great. He was master of this world. And now he isn't. He has been pushed back behind the walls of the City. The greatest of man's creations is now just able to hold the jungle off from a few square miles. You are out here. You have adapted. You have become a part of the jungle. I don't know how many of you there are, but you are not going to conquer the jungle. You do not want to. The jungle is part of you, and you of the jungle. So it is not going to be you people who make man great again. It has got to be the City. And so, although we shall always be grateful to you, I hope, yet man's destiny depends on the City, and not on you."

He stood there, obviously not understanding her, looking a trifle hurt and confused, but not overly bothered. "I do not understand you," he said. "All the City does is spew forth a human every now and then. Sometimes we save them. More often not. I don't see why you have to bother with it. I'd think you might as well forget it. We can make you live out here. Give you plenty to do." He brooded a moment, but then he shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe the Tolath can tell me." He flexed his muscles. "Are we ready to go?"

Sorin struggled to stand up. She found herself stiff after even the brief rest. "The Tolath?" she asked. "What is that?"

Kin looked at her, obviously searching for words. "The Tolath is—It's the Tolath." He shrugged. "You'll see. Only hurry now. Long ways to go before night."

As he spoke, Kaylee stretched his long sleek muscles, and, like a smooth black shadow, moved into the jungle. Torg moved after him, his nose swinging first to the ground, and then lifting to test the air. Kin, with a hand under her elbow, got her on her feet and started after Torg. And then he dropped back to bring up the rear. Mortrey flew like a gaudy ball to a tree far ahead. There he waited, his shrill voice

belaboring the jungle until they caught up with him. And when they did, he moved on once more.

She started to say something in her mind, but then she stopped. She sensed that between them there was a tight channel of communication. They hardly bothered to tell each other things, but each was tuned to the others, ready to receive and to act on the instant of reception of any danger signal. She dared not break the net for any question that could be deferred.

They were a team, Sorin realized. Theirs was a fluid unity that made them much more than the sum of their separate identities. Linked telepathically, and by that link being able to so know each other that trust was automatic, they were a completely functional group. Watching it, she was impressed. This was like one of the machines in the City. Perhaps one of the repair units, some of which included several autonomous parts linked by radio and other means in the performance of their jobs. And as the repair units were so well adapted to the City, so was this team to the jungle. It fitted here, she saw. Armed as it was against all the things of the jungle, it was still a part of the jungle, and flowed through it with a confidence and a sureness that could only come from such a unity. Why, she wondered, did something so wholly a part of the jungle, and something so wholly alien to herself, why did it bother with her? As she tried to keep up in her stumbling way with their easy wandering, she pondered the problem without finding an answer.

It was much later in the day that they stopped in an open glade. Kaylee had killed a small animal which he started to eat. Kin looked at Sorin with a somewhat doubtful air. "What kind of food for you?" he asked her. "No fire so meat is raw. Can find fruit." Torg wagged his tail and said that he could find her an animal if she wanted. Sorin, however, with rueful thanks for the offer, said she thought fruit would be very nice. Kin grinned and went off to find some, leaving her in Torg's care.

As she sat waiting for his return, she noticed some bushes along the edge of the clearing. From where she sat they seemed loaded with berries, so she asked Torg if they were good to eat. The dog-like animal grimaced at the thought but admitted that Kin thought they were good. "Revolting thought," he said. "How anybody can stand eating that kind of thing I don't see. But, you'll probably like them," he said. "Give a call if you run

into anything." And he stretched out comfortably.

She did find the berries delicious and worked along the bushes picking them as fast as she could. When the first edge of her hunger was gone, she began to look around. She found she had actually wandered out of sight of the clearing and had a moment of fright. But a quick check showed that she would have no trouble finding her way back.

A short distance beyond, there was a low bush that took her breath away. It was covered with the most beautiful flowers that almost seemed to glitter in the half-dusk of the jungle. She stood looking at it, a smile of pure aesthetic pleasure on her face. And as she drank it in with her eyes, she became aware that it was loaded with birds who added their bright colors to the bush. They were small, hardly larger than her thumb, but their songs throbbed through the air with a muted volume that was almost hypnotic in its beauty.

She heard a chirping at her feet and looked down to see a small bird there. It was like those in the bush and it sat not three feet away on the ground. "What are you doing here?" she asked aloud, a look of good humor on her face. For answer the bird hopped away a couple of times, and she saw that it dragged its wing as if it were broken. "You're hurt," she said, with pity in her voice. Once more the bird hopped feebly towards the bush. He gave a chirp that seemed to plead for mercy. "You are hurt," she repeated. "And the jungle is a very poor place to be hurt in. At least by all I've seen. I wish I could help you, but I don't see that I can. I suppose I could put you in the bush with all your friends. Would you like that?" She walked over and bent down to pick him up. With what seemed like the last vestige of his strength, he hopped barely out of her reach. "Don't be scared, little bird," she said. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm only going to help you." She followed him and bent again to pick him up. And again he just barely managed to hop out of her reach.

She was bending for about the sixth time, and beginning to feel quite exasperated, when suddenly wings banged her face. She jumped back with reflex surprise and looked around with a jerky motion. On a branch of a tree near her, she saw Mortrey. The branch still bounced up and down, and he was screaming in a raucous voice at her. And in her mind, she heard his thoughts and they also screamed at her. "What are

you trying to do? Do you have to go looking for trouble? Can't we let you out of our sight for even a moment?" She recognized that he was frightened and that this was the reason for his abuse.

"What is it?" she asked. "What was I doing that was so dangerous?"

"Oh," he said, as he calmed down. "No, you don't know, do you? Pick up that stick over there and poke the flower-bush with it. Only don't hold onto the stick too hard. And make sure you keep your balance."

She did as he told her. Picking up the stick and holding it loosely, she gently touched the edge of the bush. When it touched, the leaves and branches of the bush snapped around it. With a jerk, the stick was snapped out of her hand and into the bush. Only apparently the bush knew that it had been fooled, because in a moment, the stick was thrown back out. There was an angry ripple went over it and the birds that had been singing so beautifully, gave rasping cries of anger. Then, almost like an old lady settling herself once more in her rocker after giving the delivery boy a piece of her mind, it once more settled its branches in place. The leaves that had acted to seize or throw the stick once more fell back in place. And the delicate and beautiful flowers that had closed on the instant of action opened up again. The birds began to trill the songs as if their only thoughts were of the spring.

Sorin turned to Mortrey. "It is a pleasant thing, isn't it?" she asked, ruefully. "But I don't understand. If the bush is so deadly, how do the birds live in it?"

"The birds are part of it," Mortrey answered. "Like Kin and Kaylee and Torg are part of me, and I of them. The bush protects the birds, and feeds them putting some part of the food that it gets into berries the birds can eat. And, in return, the birds entice things to the bush. Acting as if their wings are broken, they hop along in front of other animals. And they look like an easy meal for some hungry beasts. But in trying to catch the bird, the beast gets drawn too close to the bush, and then it's all over, and both the bush and birds have much to eat."

Sorin shuddered at this new evidence of the ingenious forms of symbiosis that existed in this jungle. How, she wondered, would she ever learn. How could she, there was so much to be learned? A wave of discouragement swept over her.

Mortrey must have sensed her feeling for he flew down onto

her shoulder and snuggled his beak under her ear. "It is hard," he said, "there is so much to learn. But do not be afraid. Soon the Tolath will help you. And until it does, we will take care of you."

The Tolath, again, Sorin thought. But as she turned to ask Mortrey about it, the bird flew off to investigate something that he saw.

When Kin returned, he dropped some fruit in her lap, telling her to eat quickly, that they must hurry on. "The jungle's no place to sleep," he said. "Only the Interzone. We have to hurry." And so, with no chance to question him, she gulped down the food and they got back under way.

It was dusk when they finally reached Kin's goal. She knew when they approached it for the jungle changed its character. The dense thickets of underbrush became less frequent. There were many fewer bushes of any sort, and those there were seemed smaller. Even the grass disappeared. Only the trees remained. But the trees grew taller, until they towered into the sky. And the branches interwove until the sun was nearly blanked out. And there was a stillness in the forest, and a sense of strength.

And as they pushed on further, the forest changed again. The trees dropped down once more in size until they were hardly more than tall bushes. And they were twisted and gnarled, and had an air of age-old years. Almost you could see their roots, sturdy and massive, gripping the soil with iron fingers. Dwarfs, they were, small, but with an air of savage power. What, Sorin wondered, was the force against which this forest was braced?

As they came round one of these short squat trees, Sorin knew that they had reached the "interzone." She knew it because Kin and the others visibly relaxed. And she knew it because it was quite obvious they could go no further in that way. For in front of them lay a ridge of twisted and gnarled sticks. Piled perhaps thirty feet or more high, it stretched out in both directions. Each way it was lost in a twisting curve which let the forest hide it. But probably, she thought, it just went on and on. It had that feeling.

She looked at it more closely, wondering what it was. It was not simply a pile of sticks, she saw. For nowhere did she see an end to any stick. Rather it was like vines, twisting in amongst each other in strangling profusion. But unlike vines, there was nothing green to be seen. Only

the mass of twisted whitish ropes. Dead, and yet alive. Ugly, and savage. She shuddered, not knowing why.

As Kin and the others dropped onto the ground to rest, she asked him: "What is it?"

"The Interzone," he said. And then apparently realizing that that meant nothing to her, he added: "This is where the two forests meet. That mass there is where they fight."

"This is where the *forests* meet?" Sorin asked. He nodded. "What does that mean," she asked. "That this forest is one single thing? And that over on the other side is another one that is just as big and all one too?"

"Yes." He seemed surprised. "Sure."

"They have a common root system and physically are all joined up together?" she asked, incredulously.

"Guess so," he said. "Don't really know. I only know all the trees are one."

"Those—leafless vines," she pointed at the barrier in front of them, "where do they come from?"

"They're part of the forest," he said. He beckoned her to follow him and crawled in under the low branches of a neighboring tree. When they reached the trunk, he pointed to where there rose up from the ground a small vine, the size of a cord. And he pointed out to her how that vine had wrapped itself around the trunk of the tree. "This thing is from the other side," he said. "It is trying to strangle out this tree. But see here," he said, and pointed to where another vine, even smaller, entered the ground alongside the first one. "This one is part of this forest. It was sent in from far away so as not to be choked off if this tree itself is. And it will follow down the other vine, way back into the Interzone. And when it has followed it far enough, then it will try to choke the other vine off. Only when it starts to do this, then the other forest will counter-attack again. And so it goes."

"Then the only purpose of these vines is to fight?" she asked.

"Sure," he said. "That's enough of a job for them."

"But how do they get food?" she asked. "The vines must grow fast and use a lot of food."

"I guess so," he said, seeming uninterested. "Maybe that's why the trees are so big back a bit from the Interzone."

She looked at the tangled mass of whitish tendrils and she shuddered. To her there was something very ugly about it. Perhaps it was the thought of

the titanic struggle, spread out over miles and thousands of miles, continuing for years and centuries, marked only by the slow concentration of dead and dying fingers of the forest. Or perhaps it was just the new proof of how little she knew this jungle, even with all her education in its history.

But then she thought of the forest and the sense of horror was replaced by one of awe. For it was awe-inspiring, the thought of the millions of trees all interlocked through a common root system, forming one single entity covering hundreds of square miles. The energy spent in holding off and pushing back the other forest was built by photosynthesis back perhaps at the very walls of the City itself and carried as some complex molecule by creeping osmosis of this battle line. This was the forest and, with the slow tempo of the plant kingdom, it was the lord of the jungle. The thought was overwhelming.

It was as much to change the subject of her thoughts as anything that Sorin asked Kin: "Why did you want to reach here before night?"

"So we can sleep in peace," he answered. "This is the only place you can. The forest does not like any other plants around here but itself. I guess it figures any plant outside itself might be really a part of the other forest pretending to be little. Anyway, it chokes out everything else. Near the Interzone the only thing we got to worry about is the animals that live in there." He waved at the twisted mass.

"We couldn't sleep any place else?" Sorin asked.

"Maybe," Kin answered. "But you can't tell. If you really fall asleep, you're apt to wake up lashed to the ground with vines. Which is not a healthy situation." He grinned at her.

With shuddering horror Sorin pictured what he meant. With a sudden wave of nausea, the beating rhythm of death and of danger broke down what little strength she had left. The constant menace of the day, the insistent knowledge that there was nothing safe in all the jungle, became too much for her. She dropped onto the ground and lay there sobbing, not knowing, not caring, without thought, without even the will to live.

As she began to get some measure of control once more, she sat up and wiped the tears from her eyes. Her breath still came irregularly, its rhythm broken by the uncontrollable ghosts of her sobs, but she tried

hard to stop even that. As she looked at Kin, she saw in him the one who held the whole key to whether she lived or died. If he should reject her there was no hope for her. Then she would be left alone, without hope for mercy in the savagery of the jungle. He and only he could give her life. And she looked at him, half in gratitude, half in fear lest he should leave her. She tried to smile at him for the thought occurred to her that he might be displeased to see her tears.

Kin stood up and looked around "You are tired," he said. "Go to sleep. We will watch over you."

"Sleep?" she repeated stupidly. Did he want her to sleep so he could steal away and leave her here alone? Her eyes went wide. She wet her lips. "I . . . I'm not tired. You must be . . . You must want . . ." She looked at him.

He cocked his head at her and frowned. "Of course you are tired," he said. "What you trying to say?"

"But . . ." She trembled. "But you rescued me. You fought for me. You . . . And now you don't want me any more. You want to get rid of me. You're sorry you bothered with me." Tears rolled down her cheeks but she made no move to brush them off. She looked down at her hands that lay passive in her lap.

Kin was silent for a moment. "What put that thought into your head?" His voice was quiet. He walked over to her and crouched down beside her. He touched her chin and moved her head to make her look at him. "What are you thinking of?"

"But you must have changed your mind," she said. Her voice was patient and almost childlike. "You rescued me because I am a girl and you have been alone in the jungle without a woman. And now you do not want me. I am too much bother to you." She looked back down at her hands.

Kin looked at her but did not touch her. His eyes were warm with pity and there was a soft smile on his lips. "No, little Sorin," he said. "You do not understand. I am not sorry. Nor do I think I will be. Tonight you sleep. And tomorrow you will learn some more about the jungle. And tomorrow night you will sleep. And so it will go until there is the Tolath. And when we stand before the Tolath, it may be the Tolath will acknowledge that we two belong together. And if that be so, then we two shall be as one. But until the Tolath says that, then you will sleep at night and we shall watch and guard you. And we

shall keep you safe. This I swear." He patted her head as if she were a little girl to be comforted in the night. And, moving about ten feet away, he sat down to watch over her.

Sorin looked at him with eyes that were big and staring. Her lips trembled but then she smiled. "I guess I am tired," she said. She lay down and a look of peace came to her face. Almost immediately her eyes closed and her breathing became slow and deep.

Kin's eyes were soft as they watched her. But when they looked around at the jungle, they became hard with purpose and with resolve. And he was impervious to the amused glance of Kaylee as the cat moved into the dusk in search of his dinner. But he was aware of the sympathy of Torg as the dog stretched himself out for sleep. And idly he wondered what Mortrey thought but the bird was already asleep in a tree so he did not ask.

In the subsequent days as they worked along the interzone, Sorin learned more of the jungle. Mostly she learned about the animals in it, for few plants that were not part of the forest existed in this region. Some few did. There was one air plant draped across a branch that she accidentally touched. When she touched it, it promptly wrapped itself around her hand. Kin rushed to tear it off, paying no attention to the bits of skin that came off with it. And then he had to tear it off himself. The wounds that it left were painful, but hardly more than superficial. But this, Kin explained, was only because of the speed with which it had been removed. For the plant could be deadly if allowed to really get established.

But the variety of plants in the interzone was small. Mostly they were local variations of the forest. For the forest did not tolerate strange plants and sent its runners to strangle any out. Only the air plants that the runners could not reach or find had any chance. And even them the forest did not like. The Plants that were there did not get to grow large.

Mostly the interzone was populated with animals. There the animals found sanctuary from the vicious plants. And in the morain of intertwisted vines and runners they found sanctuary from each other. And through that mass they hunted each other, seeking food and safety. Snakes there were in vast profusion. Twice the man, the dog, and the cat had to battle snakes that came out in packs to chal-

lenge them. And small furry things with vicious teeth and claws with which to run straight up a tree were there. They, too, swarmed in packs. Mostly, they hunted the snakes but they were willing to tackle the humans and their helpers. Kin and his companions did not try to fight these animals. Instead they depended on speed and distance to get away. At the cost of some bites and scratches, this was proven a successful tactic.

There were larger animals, too. There were things somewhat similar to the monkey-thing that Sorin remembered from the first day. There was one who sat, ugly and squat atop the morain of sticks. And even sitting, he must have been a full seven feet high. His eyes were red as he watched them go by, but he made no move. As they passed by, the travelers watched him with deadly caution, and she knew that they were afraid of him.

As they moved along the face of the morain, and as the days went by, Sorin began to accept the jungle. There was no longer the overpowering strangeness to it that she had felt at first. New things there were. Each day brought its own quota. But there was not the terrifying alienness that there had been. She was learning to accept the jungle.

Occasionally, when an accident of the topography opened a view through the forest, she could see in the far distance the steel gray cube of the City. When this happened she was startled to realize how far she had come since the day that they had pushed her out the gate. Far, not only in distance, although that too, for she was not used to distances greater than those seen in the City itself. But far in the more particular sense of herself. There was a whole new part of her that was not of the City, that had nothing to do with the City, and that cared nothing about the City. This was the part that was the product of her experience in the jungle. And though that experience covered only a very few days, yet it had had much effect on her. And that part of her that was of the City was becoming submerged, pushed underneath, almost forgotten.

These glimpses of the City stirred up her thoughts once more. They made her think again of the City. And each time she renewed once more her resolve to return some day to the City. They made her think again of the necessity for her return, that she might show the people of the City the error of their ways,

awaken them from their sleep, their willful self-extinguishment in the City. Awaken them to teach them that man's destiny was greater than the City. That the City was a tool, the tool for immediate survival, but was not the ultimate answer. And she felt within her the hard core of resolve to do this thing.

Once or twice she tried to explain this to Kin but she met in him a complete lack of understanding. To him, the City was nothing. It was an abberation, something outside of the jungle, and which, because it was outside, was of no importance. When she spoke of man's destiny, he simply looked puzzled. The phrase, the concept, seemed to have no meaning for him. It left him confused and faintly irritated. It occurred to her that, in the sense of the phrase, he was not a man. He belonged to the jungle, and, to that extent, and within that meaning, he did not belong to mankind. He was an animal. A thinking, feeling animal. One with a full sense of his belonging, and of his relation to others around him. One able to enter into the best and highest emotional experiences. But, nevertheless, an animal in at least the sense of one who is aware only of the present. One who neither cares for the past nor worries about the future. With such a person, talk of the destiny of mankind was useless. The concept held no meaning for him. Sorin soon gave up the struggle.

As they moved along, Sorin became aware from what they said, that they would soon be at the Tolath. At least this was how she put it, but she did not really know how best to say it. For what the Tolath was she still had no idea. Whether it was a thing, a place, a time, or whatever, she had not been able to decide. And all her efforts to pin down the others as to just exactly what was the Tolath were completely fruitless. They seemed to be completely stymied by the effort to describe it. "The Tolath? Why, the Tolath is . . . well . . . it's the Tolath." And this was all they could say. Or would say. Was it really so unexplainable, she wondered. Or did they just not want to explain it? Was there some reason why they did not want her to know what was the Tolath?

In the deep recesses of her mind, she worried about the Tolath. Deliberately she kept her thoughts unverbalized. For if there was some reason why they did not want her to know the truth, then she did not want them reading in her mind her thoughts about it. But down

where they could not reach her thoughts, the suspicion grew that the Tolath might not be a healthy thing for her. In her studies she had come across some stories of cultures that had existed long and long ago. Primitive cultures living in the jungles of that ancient time. And these stories had told of tribal gods before whom sacrifices had been made. And the stories had even described how these tribes had sought outsiders, those not of the immediate tribe, and sacrificed them before their gods. In some places, she remembered, the preferred sacrifice was a young girl, so that the anthropomorphic god might take his pleasure with her spirit. In such cases, it was usually important, if she remembered correctly, that the girl be a virgin, at least in so far as the tribe itself was concerned. Was it possible, she wondered, that that was why Kin left her quite alone? The thought made her cringe inside but she did not let it show, either in her action or, so far as she could help it, in the forward part of her mind.

It was in the quiet reaches of the night that her worry reached its peak. For often she awoke in the early hours before the dawn and lay there, thinking. The night sounds of the jungle were all around her lending an impressive mystery to the darkness. In these hours she awoke with the certainty on her that she was marked for sacrifice, and she was afraid. Then she would lie there, her mind in a turmoil, twisting, turning, seeking a way out. She would think of escape. Once she even got to her feet to steal out into the darkness. But at that moment, off in the distance, she heard the wild shriek of some animal, she did not know what, and she knew that that course was hopeless There was no chance that she could live by herself in the jungle. There was no slightest chance, and she knew it. And so she lay back down again and softly cried herself to sleep. In that moment, she was without hope.

In the morning, and through the days, she was a different girl. As she watched Kin move with easy caution through the forest, as she felt the warm friendliness of his mind, then the nightmare thought of sacrifice was remote. When she saw the muscles ripple in his shoulders and watched his cat-footed steps she felt a confidence in him that somehow went beyond a simple faith in his ability as a hunter and as her protector Somehow then she knew that she need fear nothing from him

and that, as time went on, she could continue to depend on him for her life itself. Then it was she knew that she could easily learn to love him. In fact, she wondered if she had not already started.

It was on such a morning that they came to where the morain of twisted vines petered out on a large basalt outcropping that rose abruptly through the jungle floor. The group worked their way around the edge until they came to a break in the rock where they could climb up to its top. This took until the middle of the afternoon.

There was nothing at all on top, Sorin saw. When she looked closely at the rock, she did see some fine tendrils that interlaced across it, but they were hairthin and barely visible. "The forest keeps watch up here," Kin said when he saw her examining the rock. "Those hairlike things I figure are feelers. Just to make sure the other forest doesn't try to cross the rock."

"I see," Sorin said. "It would be rather difficult for either forest to cross the rock, I guess." She looked around. Off in the distance she saw the City, rising like a stubborn rock out of the jungle. A wave of homesickness swept over her, and she hungered for its remembered order. It was partly to push this feeling off that she turned to Kin and asked: "What are we doing here?"

"The Tolath," Kin answered simply. And he lay down and appeared to go to sleep.

"The Tolath?" Sorin asked. "But there is nothing here."

But Kin made no move to answer her. Torg, instead, asked her gruffly: "Should there be?" And then he too stretched out to rest. Mortrey was hunched down on the rock a short distance away, and he too looked asleep.

Only Kaylee looked his usual self. He was stretched out licking his claws. He looked up at her. "You do not understand," he said. "The Tolath is in the mind, and is not any of the things that you have imagined. There is no single place. But it happens that during the Tolath, we are unwatchful. This place is safe. That is why we are here. They sleep to prepare themselves. The Tolath is tiring."

Sorin seized on this first concrete statement of what the Tolath was. "It is in the minds? What do you mean?" Kaylee said nothing. "What is it?" she cried. "I've been beating my brains out trying to find out. Why the mystery?"

Kaylee grinned in his mind. "Kin and Torg and Mortrey cannot understand that you do not

know or cannot read it in their under-thoughts about it," he said. "Besides, they do not know themselves how to describe it."

"But you know that I do not understand it?" Sorin said.

"Yes," the cat answered. "I have watched you in the night when I have guarded camp. I have seen the nightmares you have conjured." There was some feeling of contempt in what he said.

"You have known my thoughts!" Sorin was puzzled. "You have seen me tremble before my imaginings. And you have said nothing. Why? Do you hate me? Do you like to see me tremble?"

Kaylee chuckled. "Perhaps," he said. "But why should I stop you? You are not one of us."

"I did not ask you to help me," she said. "I am grateful for it, but I did not demand it. And how can I help but be an outsider?"

"True," he said but with a mental shrug. "But that is not the point. The point is that you *are* an outsider. And until the Tolath says differently, you will continue to be an outsider." There was something cold and uninterested in the voice she heard in her mind. Something unanswerable, and she did not try to answer it.

"So be it," she said. "And will you then tell me what is the Tolath?"

"The Tolath is the Tolath," he said and he sounded amused. "It is too hard to describe to be worth the bother. You will soon see." He stretched himself out.

"Then why do you bother to tell me anything?" she asked in sudden exasperation.

He raised his head. "Soon perhaps, you will be one of us. It would be a nuisance if you panicked now. The Tolath would not like it. And now I sleep." There was finality in his voice and it was with finality that he put his head down on his paws and closed his eyes, leaving Sorin to sit there, thinking, wondering.

The sun was just on the horizon when Sorin woke with a start, not even knowing when she had fallen asleep. She looked around, trying to blink the sleepiness out of her eyes. About forty feet away, she saw Kin, standing, staring with blank face into the sun. Beside him Kaylee was stretched out, for once not licking his claws, but simply lying there, his eyes fixed on some unseen point. And on the other side sat Torg, his head cocked to one side and his ears pointed up. And Mortrey sat on Kin's shoulder and made no sound.

As Sorin looked at them, her

mind reached out for them. And suddenly she felt as if she were in a huge dark hall. She could still see the setting sun, and she could still see the rock and the hunters standing there. But somehow what she saw was unreal. The reality was the warm darkness, the friendly closeness as if there were around her a host of others. What were these others? She did not know. Some were human and some were not. Hunters, she thought. All the hunters of the forest, men and animals. Many different forms. But, whatever their forms, they were now all part of a single unit. With a sudden clarity as her subconscious put together the things she knew, she was aware that that unity was the Tolath.

She was aware of Kin. She was aware of him not only in the unreal sense as he stood there on the rock, but also in the Tolath, as if he were illumined by some special light. And she heard his voice as his mind called out. "Now hear me, you who are my friends," he said. "Hear me and advise me, for I bring one to the Tolath."

And out of the darkness, there came an answering voice. It was a strange voice, giving somehow a sense of immensity, of a unity that bespoke a mighty power. It was an awe inspiring voice, but she was not afraid for there was no arrogance in it. "Who is this one you bring?" it asked. "And is she fit to join with us?"

"No," she heard Kin answer. "She knows not the jungle nor even the ways of the Tolath. She is as the unborn babe and it is as such that I give her unto the Tolath."

"Let the one you bring speak up," the voice said. "We would judge for ourselves the nature of her fitness. We would reach into her mind and learn her nature that we may know whether or not she be acceptable. Let her speak!"

Sorin felt a touch of wry amusement as she thought of how she might have interpreted those words just a short time ago. For they sounded like the prelude to a sacrifice. And it was with something of a start that she asked herself why she did not now worry about the possibility. For Kaylee might not have spoken the truth. And, in fact, he had not actually denied the thought of sacrifice. Certainly there was not now any logical reason why she should not worry if there had actually been reason before. But the fact remained that she was not worried, though she could not answer why. She shrugged the problem off and, standing up, she answered: "I am here."

As she spoke, she felt her

mind turn in upon itself. The physical reality disappeared, she could no longer see it. Only there was blackness, and she could see nothing. There was a presence that she could feel and before it she was naked, without protection, without a place to hide. She felt the presence and she knew that it knew her. She felt it in her mind, and she felt it sink deeper, in and in.

"No!" she cried. "I am Sorin, and I demand the right to my own self!" With a surge of angry energy she threw off the presence. She tore it out of her mind and savagely hurled it from her. "Get out," she cried. "Get out and stay out!"

In the darkness, there was a chuckle. Where it was she did not know. And there was a strange quality to it that she did not recognize. But it was an approving chuckle, and there was an element of surprise to it. And the voice came, but it was different. Where, before, it had rolled as thunder through the darkness, now it was soft and quiet. And where before it had seemed impersonal and remote, now it was for her alone, and it had the feel of a single personality. "Yes, you are Sorin," it said. "But what is Sorin? Can you tell me?"

"What am I?" she asked. For some reason, perhaps some quality in the voice, she was not angry any more. "I am myself. I am a living, thinking individual. As such, I am important to myself, at least. And it is for this reason that I demand the right to be myself."

"I grant the right," the voice answered. "I do not think that right can be denied to whoever asks for it. But you are the first who has ever asked for it." There was a sense of wonder in the voice. "You are unique," it said, "and I acknowledge it. You are Sorin and I salute you."

"And who are you?" she asked.

"I am the Tolath," the voice answered quietly.

"That cannot be," she said. "For I know now that the Tolath is the gathering and the totality of the minds of the hunters. Such an entity could not be surprised at my answers. Either my answers would be known at least as a possibility, and hence would not be unique, or else they would be meaningless. Who are you?"

The voice chuckled. "It is true that I am the Tolath, but it is not true that the Tolath is just the combination of the minds of the hunters. The hunters think so. And it is to preserve their illusion that I have isolated us from them." This was so, Sorin realized with a start. This was

the meaning of the change in the quality of the voice. Now she was alone, except only for the other presence. "You are the first," the voice went on "to break through this illusion. You are the first to sense my presence here. Can we be partners, Sorin?"

"Partners?" she asked. "In what way?"

"I do not know," the voice said, with a sense of puzzlement. "Never have I had a partner. But are you an enemy or are you a friend? Do we seek a common goal, or are our aims apart? What do you seek, Sorin who is unique?"

"I seek to return to the City," she said. "The City is wrong, and I have the truth to set it right."

"Is that what you seek?" the voice asked. "I saw that in your mind before you threw me out. But I did not think that was an end. I did not see how it could be. Is it truly what you seek, or does it make sense to ask why you would like to return to the City?"

Sorin laughed. "You are right," she said. "It is not in itself the end I seek. What do I really seek? I do not know. The destiny of mankind, the future of the race, these things are part of it. Right now mankind is in chains. He is a slave to the City and this is wrong. And while this wrong exists, there is no future, only past. This is part of what I want. It is not all. I want to live my own life. And by living I mean much more than cringing in the corners, bowing to the will of the machine. To live as I would live, there must be no fear nor any true restraint on the freedom of the spirit. And I want that same life for my children, and my children's children. I want the future to belong to me, and not to the past." Her voice was proud and final.

"Tell me, Sorin," the voice said, "this that you have said is good, but why do you confine it to the City? This hunter, Kin, that you have met, is human. May he not carry the destiny of mankind? May not the future lie in him? And as for yourself, the jungle is strange to you. You cannot now conceive of walking in it without fear. And yet Kin does. You have seen him. Do you not think that you can someday learn to do the same? If your children are hunters, will they have fear? Why should they not know how to live in this same jungle? And finally, little Sorin, who is to be the father of those children? If I read you rightly, it should be Kin. Are you afraid to acknowledge this? Or would you destroy

him by taking him with you when you return to the City?"

"When I return?" Sorin asked.

"Yes," the voice said. "I would have you make a choice that is free. I am the Tolath. I have much power. I can return you to the City. And I will do it if you wish. I would rather you did not but I offer you that promise so that you may make your own free choice. I would rather that you stayed here and worked with me to give the human race its destiny within the jungle. For I am convinced their destiny is here. There is a pattern in this jungle. A pattern that you have seen in part. I do not think the destiny of any single race is to rule the others. But myself, with mankind, with the races of Torg and of Kaylee, and of Mortrey, and of others whom you have not seen, we can build together one single destiny. This is the pattern of the jungle. And I would have you join it."

Sorin meditated. She thought of all that she had seen within the jungle. She thought of the days that they had spent in slowly making their way through it. And she compared it with her life within the City. And she thought of Kin and what he seemed to her. Slowly a great peace grew within her and she knew what her answer would be. For as she thought of it, it became clear that the choice was simple, and lay between the extremes of life and death. The City was dead, and all that were in it were dead. Their souls were dead and their minds had ceased to function except only as soulless computers. But here, in the jungle, was life. Vibrant, vital life. Life glorying in its powers, and certain of its strength. No, this was her choice.

"You are right," she said. "This is the future, here, with Kin."

"This is your free choice?" the voice asked.

"It is," she said. "There will be moments, I suppose when things get too rough, I shall be sorry. But I do not think I shall ever long regret it."

"Nor do I," the voice replied. "In fact, I do not even think there will be many moments. For I have the power to protect you well."

"You do?" she asked. "You seem very sure of yourself for a disembodied spirit."

"Disembodied?" The voice sounded startled. "I am very far from disembodied," it went on, sounding amused. "I have said that I am the Tolath, but I did not say what the Tolath is. Know then, Sorin, that if you

would feel my loins, you need only rub your hands on the trunk of the nearest tree. If you would hear my voice, listen to the wind through the top of the trees. For I *am* the forest. And this is what the Tolath is."

As she stood stunned before that revelation, aghast at the very magnitude of the thought, she was suddenly aware that she was back with the multitude. And she was aware also that only a moment had passed since the voice of the Tolath had demanded the right to judge her. And again she heard the voice, but now it rolled like the thunder, massive in the dignity of the gathering of the minds of the host of hunters. "We have judged the newcomer," it said, "and we find her even as Kin has said. In all the ways of the jungle and even of the Tolath, she is as the little babe. Let Kin guard her, and teach her, that she may learn to take her place with us. But let it be said also that there are other ways of knowledge that are not of the jungle nor even of the Tolath. And in the ways of a woman, she is wise. Therefore let him not hesitate to learn from her. Such is the will of the Tolath."

And it was over. No longer was there anything but the physical reality. Gone was the darkness that had overlain the gathering dusk. Gone was the presence of others besides Kin and Kaylee and Torg and Mortrey. Only these four remained. And she saw Kin turn toward her, a warm and almost bashful smile on his face. She smiled back at him and ran to meet him. As his arms gathered around her, she saw over his shoulder the tops of the trees move against the sky as the wind stirred them, and she heard the voice of the forest.

INTERESTED IN THE WORLD OF THE FUTURE?

From where we stand taday, the histary af the future is just extrapalation. Ta predict that future we must be aware af the present: aware of all the facts that dan't always appear in the daily press.

DARE is the magazine that gives you thase facts. Stories that other magazines dan't dare print. Peaple that ather magazines dan't dare name. DARE is the packet-sized, 10¢ magazine that gives yau the inside story on people, sparts, crime, sex, palitics and entertainment.

WHAT IS DOUBT?

BY RICHARD SNODGRASS

ILLUSTRATED BY DREANY

It was all in the regularized and regulated books, and in the absolute facts of the Instructor—everything except what Meadows had to know. Even for that, was was an Answer. . . .

William Meadows, Classification B-2-11-7 (sophomore-second semester-dormitory eleven-room seven), sat stiffly on the concrete slab nearest the escalator of Building III. Outwardly, he was identical to the other students standing and sitting around the courtyard; his spotless white cover-alls, short blonde haircut and white boots were in perfect order of neatness. Inwardly, he exerted every ounce of control he had—hoping, even praying in his own way that there was no physical manifestation of his fear which might tell the others he was on the verge of insanity!

If anyone saw even a faint hint of deviation in, say, his eyes, it would mean Lowerlevel. It would mean he would never get the chance to ask what *now* had to be asked. Staring toward the waterless fountain in the center of the courtyard, he felt a slight tremble fluttering his fingers.

Not relaxing, he broke the stare, glancing up at Building I opposite Building III, and identical to it. Under the Arizona sun, it squatted like a frosty, unmeltable block of ice. On his left was Building II; on his right, IV. There were no structural means of support visible on or in any of the four buildings of Annex D, Liberal Arts Section, University Twelve.

University Twelve, according to the caption on the aluminum plate implanted in the waterless fountain, stood on the same ground, nine miles east for the

AN INTRODUCTION TO
PHILOSOPHY
J. Dreamy

former city of Phoenix, Arizona, where a small college, Arizona State College of Tempe, had stood before the Eight Hour War of May 16, 1993, followed by The Renaissance and Reorganization for Security, Phase One.

May of Ninty-three, he thought, shoving his hands down in the deep pockets. Twenty-one years ago. Monmouth, Illinois. Four years old with a blue bright sky over the little town, muttering maples making backyard shade over him as the damp, clean-smelling sand tickled his fingers. The sandbox had been green. He even remembered his father painting it the summer before. Then the sun blotted out by a thick cloud, earth-made, oozing up from the direction of the Monmouth Ordnance Plant, and his mother running out from the kitchen, flour on her hands, crying, grabbing and hurting his hand. Five days in the scary shadows of the basement—"Please turn on the lights, Mom!"—then going to identify the rotting, burnt blackness they said was his father. His mother whispering, "Remember that, Billy. Remember as long as you live."

"As long as I live," he muttered, looking at the other students, all men, who sat and stood woodenly about the court. Yesterday, he had had a long time to live and work, and these men had been his friends. Today—today he did not know.

Because *they* were still secure.

And he was not.

The thought made him hurry his eyes around the courtyard, afraid someone might have heard the thing still screaming in his mind.

I am no longer secure!

But they were not looking at him, or at each other. With the portable wire-recorders in their right hands, they did not sit or stand together. They did not talk to one another. They all seemed to be listening to the mumbling static of the four loudspeakers, one on each building.

He tried again, for the last time, to force his mind back into its former, logical channel, but it was impossible—now. Even though he recognized the new factor, the utterly illogical factor for what it was, it was impossible to stop it from creeping among his psychological machinery, destroying everything, growing and feeding upon itself. It was a virus without cure; a reason without rhyme.

It was Doubt.

Simple, pure, stupid Doubt, destroying his life, even though they had analyzed the thing the year before in Psychology Two,

coming to the obvious, logical conclusion that Doubt stemmed from Distrust of Fact. And it followed, therefore, that there was no such thing as Doubt since Fact is irrevocable. A belief, of course, could not be doubted simply because it was not Fact and did not, therefore, exist.

But Doubt did exist, he knew, recognizing the thing growing stronger second by second as he sat on the uncomfortable slab of concrete. *What is?* he asked himself. What is not?

What? Where? How? Who? Why?

And he had the answer to this last one, at least in his own case. Why he was no longer secure was due to a radical old man, dying, smiling, telling him where to find a book.

An unauthorized book.

A book not cleared by Security Six.

A book entitled, "An Introduction To Philosophy," published in 1947, when the world had not yet realized or evolved to a point where it saw that Security was the answer. The Total Answer. Before men had been shown, through reorganized education, that to get Security they must give up the myth of Freedom expounded by stupid idealists. Before they saw that Truth, Beauty and God were Security.

But it was wrong, all wrong, he knew, seeing in his mind his grandfather on the bed, his breathing much too rapid, his words broken by weak, childlike coughs.

"Out in the middle of that cornfield, boy. Where we walked when—when you were four—before they came on your fifth—birthday and took you away—to school." He laughed, coughing. "School—drool. Out there by that oak—buried on the north side of the trunk—you'll find a book." He paused, his breath coming in short, almost desperate gasps. "It's an honest to Good book—not a spool of wire. Read it. No matter what they've told you—think about what you read. Understand, boy?"

The old man had died that night and, after the funeral he had returned to school, planning to turn the book over to Security Six. Instead, he absently dropped it in his desk drawer and forgot it.

Then last night about nine he had run across it while cleaning out the drawer. He opened it, began reading. At first, it was so much nonsense, but he read on just for laughs. Then he stopped laughing, a strange feeling moving through him. He went back and started over, reading carefully. He read all

night and into the sunrise.

He could not sleep even the two hours remaining before class. As he sat by the room window and watched the orange globe rise in the eastern sky, the Doubt had risen in his mind. It had grown and festered during the first two classes, but he had waited to ask the questions of The Instructor of Introduction To Basic Security Philosophy, Number Two.

No matter what, he must ask the questions. It was too big, too intense, too burning to hold down any longer. He would ask —knowing the ramifications.

The four loudspeakers sputtered, then boomed: "The rest period is over. Organize your groups. Two minutes."

He fell in with his group, thirty men wearing the loose, white cover-alls, each carrying a wire-recorder. At the front of the column, the Leader raised his hand, commanded, "Forward!", and dropped it. They moved mechanically, stepping onto the escalator in pairs, and glided upward, two steps between each pair of men. On the Secondlevel—the Lowerlevel had never been visited by a student who returned—they moved off the endless stairs, marched down a doorless corridor of frosty white glass. Presently, the leader held his hand up again, commanding. "Halt!" He then reached up, pressed a small red dot—the only foreign color in the long hall of white—and a panel glided open noiselessly. They broke formation without a word, filed inside and took their places on the evenly placed concrete slabs. Each man placed his recorder beside him, opened the case and plugged in the single wire. Their heads came up almost in unison, waiting in silence for the Instructor's voice.

The Instructor sat on a concrete slab before them. He was an aluminum case the size of a double-bed. Above it, hanging like a large ear on the glass wall, was a humming loudspeaker. It shattered the quiet: "Start your recorders!"

Each man flipped the switch.

"This morning we cover Phase Nine of Basic Philosophy: The Impregnability of Absolute Security. Before beginning my lecture, are there any questions related to yesterday's lecture?"

Meadows felt the sweat on his forehead, the dampness in his palms; then hesitantly, he pressed the small red dot on the concrete beside him.

The metallic voice hummed, as a professor might do studying his seating chart to see which student has raised his hand.

"Seat six. Row two. Meadows, William. B-2-11-7. Ask your question."

He wanted to give it up. Let it go. It was crazy to—

"Ask your question," the voice said, an edge of irritation creeping in.

He rose to attention, looking at the case. "Sir, who was Rousseau?"

The loudspeaker sputtered. Then demanded, "What?"

"Who was Jean Jacques Rousseau, and what is meant by the social compact?"

It did not hesitate. "Your question is not related to yesterday's lecture. But I will answer it. There was no such individual. There was no such thing. Sit down, Meadows, William."

He remained standing, his damp fingers trembling. "Who was John Stuart Mill, and what is meant by representative government?"

"B-2-11-7. Sit down!"

"Who was Henry David Thoreau, and what is civil disobedience? Who was John Locke, and what is civil government?"

"Sit down!"

Although it was against Educational Regulation 417, several students turned and looked at him as he went on. "Who was Adam Smith, Hegel, Einstein, Bacon, Christ, Jefferson, Descartes, Galileo, Newton, Marx, Gandhi? Tell me?" he screamed. "I demand an answer!"

The loudspeaker hummed, as if waiting.

Suddenly he turned to the class. "I know who these men are!" he shouted, not recognizing his voice. "And you must find out. You and you and you!" His finger moved wildly from startled face to startled face. "Find out. Think about what you find. Study the old books! Read! The Earth is two billion years old. There were philosophies before the Basic Security Philosophy. And there will be philosophies after—" He broke off, the words frozen in his throat.

The panel by which the class had entered slid open. Two robots, each with four metal tentacle arms, moved into the room. They were painted white. Antiseptic white.

He did not try to run. There was a very low moan from several of his classmates as he began walking to meet the machines, whispering, "I *asked*. No matter what, I *asked*." For the first time since playing in the green sandbox, he was perfectly happy.

The eight metal arms wrapped around and picked him up; he looked like a man tangled in a coil spring. They moved back

down the aisle as the Instructor's voice commenced again: "Meadows, William, B-2-11-7, has suffered a nervous breakdown. Delusions of this sort often occur due to over-study and devotion to—"

The panel closed. There was now only the harsh noise of the four metal feet on the frosty white floor. Moving toward the elevator, he felt the tears flooding his eyes, misting his vision. It was the first time he had cried since viewing the burnt blackness that had been his father.

Inside the elevator, going down slowly — too slowly — he sensed one of the tentacles unwinding from around his body, then saw the ugly metal thing swing into position before his face, directly below his right eye. He saw the needle finger poised, waiting, and one last thought raced to his lips.

"Thanks, grandfather. I asked about—"

The needle punctured his eye, then his brain.

As they lowered the remaining distance, the robot on the left sent a radio message to the one on the right.

"This is the eighth one this month."

"True."

"Two in Chicago two in New York one in El Paso one in San Francisco one in Mexico City one here."

"True."

"Each month there are more."

"True."

"Why is this phenomenon increasing?"

"I do not know."

"What is doubt?"

"I do not know."

YOU'LL FIND IT IN SPACE

William Tenn is well known for such fine stories as CHILD'S PLAY and VENUS AND THE SEVEN SEXES. He is very concerned with the future of science fiction—and has decided to do something about it. A little known fact about Mr. Tenn is that he is as much an authority on literature and modern fiction as he is on science fiction. He has combined these talents in a hard-hitting article, THE FICTION IN SCIENCE FICTION. You will want to read this frank article because you are going to be hearing a lot about it in the future.

Don't forget to read it in the NOVEMBER issue of **SPACE** SCIENCE FICTION

THE MEDDLERS

BY C. M. KORNBLUTH

We love Cyril Kornbluth. We love his agent, too. But in the final analysis, we print this only because we love our fellow editors too much to subject them to receiving stories like this without proper warning!

Reev Markon, Continental Weather Chief, swore one of his affected archaic oaths as his pocket transceiver beeped. "By my lousy halidom!" he muttered, turning the signal off and putting the pint-sized set to his face.

"How's that again, chief?" asked the puzzled voice of his assistant Moron Slobb.

"I didn't mean you, Slobb," Markon snapped. "Go ahead. What is so by-our-lady important that I must be dragged from the few pitiful hours of leisure I'm allowed?"

"Meddling," Moron Slobb said in a voice of deepest gloom.

"Ding-bust the consarned villains!" Markon shrieked. "I'll be right down."

He cast a bilious eye over the workshop where he had hoped to relax over the monthend using his hands, forgetting the wild complexities of modern life while he puttered with his betatron planer, his compact little thermonuclear forming reactor and transmutron. "I'll meddle them," he growled, and stepped through his Transmitter.

There were wild screeches around him.

"I'm sorry, ladies!" he yelled. "It was completely—completely —" One of the ladies hit him with a chair. He abandoned explanations and ducked back through the Transmitter with a rapidly swelling eye. Through the other he read the setting on the transmitter frame. His wives' athletic club, as he had suspected. Nor had they bothered to clear the setting after using the Transmitter.

"Lollygagging trumpets," he muttered, setting his office com-

bination on the frame and stepping through.

Moron Slobb tactfully avoided staring at the discolored eye. "Glad you're here, chief," he burbled. "Somebody seems to have gimmicked up a private tractor beam in the Mojave area and they're pulling in rainclouds assigned to the Rio Grande eye—I mean Rio Grande Valley."

Reev Markon glared at him and decided to let it pass. "Triangulate for it," he said. "Set up the unilateral Transmitter. We'll burst in and catch them wet-handed."

He went to his private office and computed while the mechanical work was being done outside. A moderately efficient tractor beam, however haywire, could pull down five acre-feet of water a day. Rio Grande was a top-priority area drawing an allotment of eighty acre-feet for the growing season, plus sunships as needed. Plancom had decided that what the Continent needed was natural citrus and that Rio Grande was the area to supply it. Lowest priority for the current season had been assigned to the Idaho turnip acreage. He could divert rainfall from Idaho to Rio Grande. If that wasn't enough, he could seize the precipitation quota of Aspen Recreational with no difficulty since three Plancomembers had broken respectively a leg, a pelvis and seven ribs on Aspen's beginner's ski trail. . . .

Slobb told him: "Chief, we're on it and the Transmitter's set up."

Reev Markon said: "Take a visual first. Those wittold jerks aren't going to booby-trap *me*."

He watched as a camera was thrust through the Transmitter, exposed and snatched back in a thousandth of a second.

The plate showed an improvised-looking tractor-beam generator surrounded by three rustic types in bowler hats and kilts. They obviously hadn't noticed the split-second appearance of the camera and they obviously were unarmed.

"I'm going in," Reev Markon said, cold and courageous. "Slobb, arm yourself and bring me a dazzle gun."

In two minutes the weapons had been signed out of the arsenal. Reev Markon and Moron Slobb walked steadily through the Transmitter, guns at the ready. To the astounded, gaping farmers Reev Markon said: "You're under arrest for meddling. Step through this—"

The rustics stopped gaping and went into action. One of them began ripping at the generator, trying to destroy evidence. The other uncorked an uppercut at Slobb, who inter-

cepted it neatly with his chin. Reev Markon shut his eyes and pulled the trigger of the dazzle gun. When he opened his eyes both farmers and his assistant were lying limply on the floor. Puffing a good deal, he pitched them one by one through the invisible portal of the unilateral Transmitter. He surveyed the generator, decided it would do as evidence and pitched it through also before he stepped back into the Continental Weather office himself.

When the farmers had recovered, a matter of twenty minutes or so, he tried to interrogate them but got nowhere. "Don't you realize," he asked silkily, "that there are regular channels through which you can petition for heavier rainfall or a changed barometric pressure or more sunlight hours? Don't you realize that you're disrupting continental economy when you try to free-lance?"

They were sullen and silent, only muttering something about their spinach crop needing more water than the damn bureaucrats realized.

"Take them away," Reev Markon sighed to his assistant, and Slobb did. But Slobb rushed back with a new and alarming advisory.

"Chief," he said, "Somebody on Long Island's seeding clouds without a license—"

"The cutpurse crumb!" Reev Markon snarled. Two in a row! He leaned back wearily for a moment. "By cracky, Slobb," he said, "you'd think people would speak up and let us know if they think they've been unjustly treated by Plancom. You'd think they'd tell us instead of haywiring their rise in private and screwing the works."

Slobb mumbled sympathetically, and Reev Markon voiced the ancient complaint of his department: "The trouble with this job is, everybody does things about the weather, but nobody talks about it!"

AMONG THE MISSING

You won't find THE CHART ROOM in this issue. This is caused by a variety of factors, not the least among them being a lack of letters. The letters, however, are coming in, and you will find THE CHART ROOM back in the November SFA. Let us have your ideas and opinions, there will always be a spot in THE CHART ROOM for an interesting letter.

THE VENUSIAN

BY IRVING E. COX, JR.

ILLUSTRATED BY H. R. SMITH

To survive as a group meant that the Earthmen must adapt; but to survive as a culture—as Earthmen—in the lizzard-civilization of Venus meant that limits must be set upon such adaptation. What limits?

The child saw him as he came out of the Council Building. It ran screaming to its mother.

"Skoon! Skoon!"

The mother carried the child to Curt, holding out her thinly scaled, six-digeted hand in apology.

"Forgive my daughter," she said softly, in the liquid tongue of Venus.

"Of course; I understand," Curt answered in the same tongue

"See Gredda?" the lizard woman said to her daughter. "This is not a Skoon monster. He is a man, just as we are."

Curt smiled. After seventeen years he was used to it: the horror of the very young children, who had not seen him before, and the embarrassed apologies of their parents. Even now, when Dale Collins' ultimatum lay on the Council table, the reaction of the Venusians had not changed.

From a purse fastened to his shorts, Curt took a square of compressed Borgan eggs, which stank lusciously of very dead fish. The Venusian child reached eagerly for the confection, her face scales quivering with anticipation.

"As I told you, he is a man. See?" The mother set the child down on the gold-paved street. "You must come and visit our island," she said to Curt. "Bring your family, Friend. When our

children come to know you, they will not be afraid and they will offer you no more of these discourtesies."

Curt thanked her and turned toward his glider, which stood in the parking lagoon behind the Council Building. The boat was a flat of wood, twenty feet long. It was made from a cross-section of an ivy tree, and powered —like all Venusian watercraft— by an enormous, web-footed reptile, the Venusian counterpart of the horse. When the glider had passed beyond the heavy traffic in the city canals, Curt jerked the reins and the chip-like boat skipped across the open water at a speed exceeding eighty miles an hour.

The depression closed upon Curt's mind again. He sprawled flat on the glider, clinging to the safety rope. The mist and warm air beat against his face, but it brought none of the customary feeling of relaxation. After seventeen years, his carefully constructed security was gone— gone because Dale Collins had sent his insolent challenge to the Council.

To himself, Curt admitted that the disaster had been inevitable. It began less than a year after the Earth-expedition had first landed on Venus.

"They're willing to give us an island of our own," Dale Collins had said to Curt. "We have to take it, Commander Hallen; we'll never escape from Venus."

"We're still exploring, Dale; we've investigated less than half the planet, and even that—"

"I'm satisfied, sir. Gold is the only abundant metal on Venus. Suppose we do eventually find traces of another metal; suppose we are able to make a gold alloy. We're not sure we'll ever develop a metal strong enough to build a shuttle rocket. We're stuck here, sir, until another expedition comes from the Earth."

"Which isn't a remote possibility. As far as they know, Dale, our expedition was lost. You know how Congress kicked at appropriating money for us; they'll never vote funds for a second expedition."

"Not this year or the next, but they'll come some day, sir. The important thing is for us to survive until they find us— or our grandchildren."

"Granted; but we can't survive in isolation!"

"On the contrary, Commander Hallen, we won't survive any other way. If we take your advice and mingle with the Venusians, our children will forget our ways. They'll become Venusians—at least in a cultural sense—in spite of anything we can do to prevent it. They'll lose

identity as human beings, Commander!"

"Survival is adaptation, Dale. Our children have to become Venusians; that's the environment they must live in."

Dale Collins' eyebrows arched as a slow smile spread over his face. "Really, sir? Darwin, I think, had a different explanation."

Friend Ljerdja joined them, putting his clammy, six-fingered hand on Curt's shoulder. Ljerdja was very old, and by virtue of his age honored with the presidency of the Venusian Governing Council.

"You have reached a decision, Friend Hallen?" Ljerdja asked. *Friend* was the only title of address known among the Venusians, and it was used without respect to age or sex.

Curt spoke very slowly in reply. "Friend Ljerdja, we are grateful for your offer, but we prefer—"

"We accept it," Dale Collins put in.

"Friend Collins speaks only for himself."

Ljerdja's fragile arms fluttered with distress. "We had no intention of provoking a disagreement, Friend Hallen! It seemed to the Council that you Earth-people would be happier if you had a separate island of your own, where none of our children would intrude with their embarrassing cries of 'Skoon.' "

"We understand their fear; we are not offended," Curt answered. "We prefer to make our homes among your people, Ljerdja, in a normal way—if you'll have us."

"And now, Commander," Collins said, "you're speaking only for yourself."

"We can compromise," Ljerdja proposed. "Those of you, like Friend Collins, who want the isolation of an island, shall have it. We will never come to disturb you or to pry into your lives; the land is yours. As for the rest—we welcome you, Friend Hallen, as a man of Venus."

Dale Collins' acceptance of the island split the survivors of the Earth expedition into two camps. There were only twelve, eight men and four women. Perhaps it was that disproportion in the division of the sexes that made the separation inevitable. Responding to the instinctive drive for biological survival, four men had married the four women. The other four men, including Dale Collins, had retreated to the isolated island. As a logical means of finding mates, their withdrawal made no sense to Curt—not for a long time, and then it was too late for him

to prevent the inevitable tragedy.

Curt saw the familiar hills of his home island through the mist. He pulled on the reins, reducing the speed of his skimming glider. The boat slid smoothly up the gold-walled landing trough. Curt unhitched the reptile and turned it into the pasture lagoon before he sloshed through the shallow water to dry land.

He stood, for a moment, looking up at the walls of his home, sprawling at the crest of a low hill. He was a big, bronzed, black-haired man. Though he was approaching fifty, his body was still hard with the smooth-rippling muscle of youth. A trace of white spread through the thick hair at his temples. Except for the tightly woven shorts he wore, Curt was naked and barefoot.

The shorts were a compromise with Venusian custom. Curt's children went naked, as their Venusian neighbors did. The children would always listen obediently when Curt or Alice tried to explain the Earthly folklore of clothing. But they never understood the explanation; and the purpose of dress entirely escaped them.

Curt's second son, Benny, met him as he approached the house. Benny was fourteen, and not yet fully grown; but already he was as large as his father, tall and broad-shouldered, with a mane of uncut black hair hanging to his shoulders.

"Salute, Friend Father!" Benny's smile was a splash of gleaming teeth. He spoke in singing Venusian. He knew no other language, although Curt and Alice had periodically tried to teach their children English.

"Where's Alice?" Curt asked.

"Mother's on the terrace." Benny's dark eyes sparkled with excitement. "The Raydens came over for the afternoon; we're all playing in the lagoon."

Curt's heart sank. He wanted to talk to his wife, but he would have to put it off now. Under normal conditions, Curt would not have resented a social call from his Venusian neighbors. It symbolized again the fact that Curt and his family were accepted by the Venusians. A ritual of social recreation was the backbone of their culture; their lives were organized for leisure.

Benny bent over the thick-leaved brush that hid the foundation of the house. He began to whistle shrilly. "I just beat Drago Rayden swimming across the lagoon," he told his father. "The first time, too! But Scizzer ran away in the excitement." Benny whistled again, and a black, hooded snake slithered

timidly out of the brush. The boy held out his arm; the snake twisted up to his shoulder, settling its broad, flat head on his collarbone. Benny scolded, "Good, old Scizzer." It was half in anger, as he caressed the flat head with the point of his chin; Scizzer hissed contentedly.

As always, Curt repressed an involuntary shudder. The pet snakes were a Venusian custom he and Alice could not bring themselves to adopt; but the children had taken to it as other Earth children in another world kept cats and dogs.

Curt and his son walked through the house. From the wide door opening on the terrace, Benny sprang across the stones and knifed into the lagoon, Scizzer clinging tight to his arm. Curt saw Alice lounging beside the dark water, the baby in her lap. The matriarch of the Rayden clan sat beside her, chatting cordially. Curt joined the two women.

"Salute, Friend Hallen!" the Venusian woman said. She was a tall lizard, but, like all Venusians, she had a surprisingly human face. She sat with her short, thick tail dangling in the water, and she swished it back and forth as she talked.

"Salute, Friend Rayden," Curt returned. Reluctantly he added the proscribed invitation, "You and your family will stay for food?"

"You do us a kindness, Friend Hallen."

"I've already said we'll return their call tomorrow, Curt," Alice told him.

Since it was expected of him, Curt plunged into the water and joined in the game. After an hour he withdrew to the bank and lay on the wet terrace stones, watching the others while Alice and the Rayden matriarch set out a meal inside the house.

Nine of Curt's children—four boys and five girls—continued to play tirelessly with the visiting Venusians. Curt's oldest son and daughter were not there; they had already married and set up homes of their own. Benny would take a wife when he reached fifteen, probably Jorgensen's third daughter.

It was a good life, Curt thought. It had lasted for seventeen years. The tiny Earth colony had thrived. Curt had twelve children; the Jorgensens, ten; the Thayers, eleven; and the Brills, eight. There were already six youngsters in the second generation. Eight of the twelve survivors of the Earth expedition had grown into a colony of fifty-five, scattered among the Venusian suburban

islands which surrounded the planetary capital city.

But now Dale Collins' ultimatum threatened the survival of them all. Curt clenched his fists and ground them against the wet stones.

Three years ago Curt had gone to Collins' island bearing what he thought would be good news. Dale Collins, bearded, naked and hollow-eyed, had been derisively unimpressed.

"So you've found a metal?" he sneered.

"Scattered deposits," Curt admitted. "But we're getting it out slowly; in six or seven years we should have enough to make our alloy of gold."

"So soon as that?" Collins' brows arched mockingly. "My, we are making progress!"

"And Phil Thayer has worked out a fuel formula. The goal's in sight, Dale; we'll be able to go home."

"You will, Hallen. We like it here; we're staying."

"We'll need your help, Collins, and I thought—" Curt's voice trailed off and his eyes strayed to the three men standing behind Collins. The four had met Curt at the landing trough on the beach. Scowling and unfriendly, they had made no effort to ask Curt to their cabin. They stood blank-faced, holding fast to their stone-tipped spears. Only in their eyes did Curt see any spark of expression—a blazing gleam, intense, fanatical, disturbingly inhuman.

"Our expedition," Collins said flatly, "came to conquer Venus and we—"

"No, Dale; to explore it."

"It's all one and the same in the end. Venus belongs to us. We've learned how to survive, Hallen."

Curt turned back to his glider. He saw it, then—a momentary glitter of eyes, a vague shape hidden in the undergrowth. He grasped Collins' arm.

"Dale! There's someone—a woman—"

"Here, on our bachelor island?" Collins' laughter roared out feverishly. "Where would we find a woman, Hallen? There were only four; they stayed with you and Jorgensen and Thayer and Brill."

Curt's boat had skimmed away from the island while their derisive laughter still sang in the warm air. Curt had accepted Collins' explanation because he could do nothing else. But he knew he had stumbled upon the truth. Biologically, a man could mate with a Skoon. The Skoons bore an exact physical resemblance to men, although they were the most vicious jungle beasts on the planet of Venus. The idea that

Collins would mate with a Skoon churned Curt's soul with revulsion and disgust.

Alice came to the door, calling her family and guests to dinner. Curt pushed himself up from the terrace. Dripping and naked, the others came out of the lagoon and trooped after him into the eating hall. It was a long, low room. The floor, walls and ceiling were plated with gold. Close to the ceiling long, transparent tubes glowed an iridescent green, spreading a soft light over the room. Deprived of all metals except gold, Venusian science had advanced primarily in terms of biology. Plants, marine life and native animals were harnessed to Venusian industry. Web-footed reptiles powered their water-gliders; microscopic ocean flora filled the lighting tubes; the tubes themselves were made from the sap of the ivy tree.

In Curt's eating hall was the typical Venusian banquet board, designed to seat as many as fifty. Venusians had large families—as Curt did himself—and they were constantly entertaining.

Curt's family sat on stools. Their guests used the regular, backless, Venusian benches, which had rear-end cubicles where they could rest their tails. Except for Curt and Alice, everyone at the table had one or more pet snakes twisted around his arm.

The food was typically Venusian—a number of salad-like dishes, several steaming platters of boiled fish, and the irresistible—if odorous—cakes of compressed Borgan eggs.

Before the meal was over Curt heard a glider screech into the island landing trough. He went to the door as Friend Mannak hurried across the black ground toward the house. Mannak was the Einstein of Venusian science, director of the Experimental Institute, Chief Consultant for the Council, and by all odds the most respected Venusian on the planet.

Although Curt earned his living as an Institute lecturer—as did Jorgensen, Thayer and Brill—Curt had not directly contacted Mannak since the early days, when the survivors of the Earth expedition had lived in the Institute. The scientist drew Curt aside into the tiny reading room.

"Salute, Friend Hallen!" Mannak grasped Curt's hand in his six, clammy fingers.

"Salute, Friend Mannak; I am deeply honored—"

"I've neglected your people disgracefully in the past few years." Mannak's aging face scales quivered with apology. "Sometimes I feel that we've

drained you of information, and given nothing in return."

"You've made a home for us, Friend."

"Yes, you're Venusians. Just so." The scientist snorted with a surge of emotion and grasped Curt's hand again. "But someday, of course, you will leave us; unless—unless your alloy of gold—"

"We're mining all the alloy metal we can find, but we still require at least another half-ton."

"May I have a sample of the metal, Friend Hallen? I want to take it back to the Institute. Perhaps some of my researchers might develop a substitute."

"Don't tell me you made a trip out here just for that! I could have brought it to you at any time."

The scientist's hand closed on Curt's arm, and his voice sank to a rasping whisper. "I want you to finish your escape rocket quickly, Friend. It may be necessary for your people to—to get away from Venus."

"I'll show you what we have. The storage shed is outside. We'll need Benny's help."

Curt summoned his son from the eating hall. Benny and the scientist exchanged the prescribed greetings and the three crossed the terrace to the square, gold-walled building which stood on a wooden scaffolding beside the lagoon. A warm rain was falling. The metal walls were as slick as a glider landing trough. Slowly, with straining shoulder muscles, Benny and Curt boosted the scientist through the round opening in the bottom of the building. Then they pulled themselves in after him.

A bank of lighting tubes kept the room dry and warm. On the floor chunks of a silvery metal glistened beneath a thick, transparent coating. Curt selected a small piece and, with a sharp-pointed stone, he began to chip away the protective covering. With the courteous manners of a Venusian child, Benny kept quietly in the background while his elders talked.

"After we refine the ore," Curt explained, "we store it here. Our chief difficulty is preventing oxidation until we're ready to use it. You remember how rapidly our expedition rocket rusted because of the high oxygen content of the Venusian air. But I think we've worked out an effective system of protection. The room keeps out most of the moisture, and we seal the individual pieces of the metal with a coating of ivy sap."

"You've assembled so little, Friend Hallen!" Mannak ex-

claimed. "And you've worked at it so long!"

"The ore deposits are scattered, and they're deep in the ground. It'll be at least two more years before—"

"You can't wait that long! This morning, Friend Hallen, the Governing Council asked your opinion about the action we should take against Dale Collins and your fellow Earth-men. You said we must destroy them. Why?"

Curt answered woodenly, tonelessly, "Three days ago, Dale Collins invaded the island next to his. His men murdered every Venusian they could lay their hands on. A survivor tells us the island was attacked by fifty men—not four."

"But we know that can't be true; there are only four of them."

"Do we?" Curt laughed bitterly. "You have seen Collins' ultimatum. He says he'll make a treaty with us, if we'll evacuate and surrender twenty of the southern islands to him. Four Earth-men have no use for so much land." Curt drew a deep breath. "The truth, Friend Mannak, is obvious, I think: Collins and his men have mated with the Skoons."

Benny gasped and forgot his manners. "No, father! You must be wrong! A man would not mate with beasts!"

Curt put his arm around his son's naked shoulder. "Sorry, Benny; no other explanation will hold water."

"But—Skoons!" Benny's body trembled with shock.

"No other explanation," the Venusian scientist agreed dully. "And you gave the logical answer, Friend Hallen; we must destroy them all. You're right, but I've persuaded the Council to veto your proposal."

"Why, in the name of the Great Mist?" Curt demanded. "You can't compromise with—"

"We can gain time. Time for you, Friend Hallen. Eventually we shall have to wipe them out. But you know the great weakness of our people." The Venusian held up his arms. "We have no strength in our arms to hurl weapons against them; and we have no weapon except our snakes. Yes, we can stamp out Dale Collins and his breeder Skoons, but there will be hundreds of casualties. The terrible Skoon-fear will rise high in our minds again. All our accumulation of knowledge and civilization will not counteract it. Our mourning will always remind us that you Earth-men can mate with Skoons. Eventually, for our own safety, we will convince ourselves that we must destroy you, too. It would be foolishness,

of course; but the fear would warp our rational thinking. Before that time comes, Friend Hallen, you must build your rocket and take your people away from Venus."

He fell quiet. There was a long, brittle silence, broken when Benny whispered,

"Skoons! Men have mated with Skoons!"

"Tomorrow," Mannak said heavily, "I will lead a delegation to Dale Collins and propose a treaty."

"May I go?"

"Thank you, Friend. We will need your help, I think. The official Council glider will leave the capital early tomorrow afternoon."

The following day, as Curt left the house, Benny slipped out and joined him. "My older brother is married," Benny said. "I am the first son, now, father. In time of danger, I am expected to be at your side."

Spoken like a true Venusian! Curt's heart swelled with pride in his son.

They went to the capital on the glider. Curt sprawled flat on the deck, clinging to the safety rope; Benny stood, Venusian fashion, in the bow, riding the skimming boat like an aquaplane—tall, proudly naked, his black hair dancing in the wind. When Curt slowed the craft to negotiate the heavy traffic in the city canals, Benny dropped on the deck beside his father.

"Father," he said thoughtfully, "some day we must fight the Skoons and slay them."

"The Venusians will, Benny."

"That's what I said—we'll have to fight them. Father, wouldn't the metal we're mining make a weapon? Suppose we shaped it into long, flat strips, with sharpened edges and—"

"On the Earth, Benny, we'd call that a sword."

"Sword." Benny played with the unfamiliar word for a moment. "Sword. It would be stronger than the spears of the Skoons."

"But useless, Benny. The Venusians haven't the strength in their arms to use such a weapon."

Benny flexed his muscles. "Are the Skoons stronger than we are, father?"

"Now get that idea out of your head, Benny—and get it out fast. There won't be any fighting. If we use our metal to make swords, it'll rust. We would never be able to build our rocket, then. And right now that comes first. Friend Mannak's right. We can't destroy Dale Collins' Skoon colony without hundreds of Venusian casualties; and, if that happens, we destroy ourselves, too."

"Yes, father."

The official Council glider was waiting in the lagoon behind the Council Building. Friend Mannak and two other Venusians went with Curt and his son on the treaty mission. The long boat, powered by a brace of web-footed reptiles, slid into the landing trough on Collins' island late in the afternoon. Collins met them on the beach and silently conducted them up a steep path to a cliff-top clearing overlooking the sea. A fire blazed up against the darkening clouds.

Collins, apparently, had given up all pretense at secrecy; as they waited, a band of Skoons came stealthily out of the woods and surrounded them. A wave of nausea ate at Curt's viscera; for the mob was talking—and their words were English. They were dressed in crudely made slacks and blouses; woven sandals were on their feet. Their yellow hair was cut and combed. They fairly gleamed with the superficial gloss of humanity.

Benny shrank, trembling, against his father. "Skoons!" he whispered. "And they're wearing body coverings, the way you and mother do. Why, father? Why? Do they think we're Skoons, too?"

Dale Collins listened impatiently to the Venusian delegates as they outlined their treaty. Suddenly he cut them short and turned to Curt.

"I'm glad you brought me Mannak," he said, speaking in Venusian to make certain that the delegates understood his insolence. "We'll dispose of him, and the rest will—"

"They have the immunity of a diplomatic mission, Collins."

Collins roared with laughter. "A diplomatic mission from—from lizards? Curt, we're men. We don't make treaties with animals."

"Don't lose your head, Collins."

"And you came yourself, Curt; that showed exceptionally good sense. It's nice to be on the winning side, isn't it?" The syrup oozed out of his voice and he barked a command at his men. The Skoons threw ropes around the Venusians, dragging them back against tree trunks at the edge of the clearing. Curt moved to help them, and found himself hemmed in by a ring of spears, the sharp, stone points biting into his chest.

"The lizards we killed on the island made good eating, Curt," Collins said languidly. "The best steaks I've had since I left Chicago. Try it, sometime. This fish diet on Venus gets mighty monotonous after seventeen years."

"You—you ate them!" Benny whispered. He stared in horror

at Collins. After a moment, he doubled over, retching violently. Collins jerked the boy erect. Benny staggered back toward the edge of the cliff. Collins snatched his arm and twisted his face toward the firelight.

"Your son, Curt?"

"Yes."

"New blood; glad you thought of it. I have just the mates for him."

"Skoons?" Benny asked in terror.

"My own daughters. Yes, boy, a whole tribe to choose from."

Benny stared for a moment into Collins' blazing eyes. Then, suddenly, he jerked his arm free and sprang over the cliff into the Venusian sea.

"After him!" Collins cried.

A score of his people scurried down the steep path to the beach. For more than an hour Curt waited, under heavy guard, in the clearing. On the beach below he heard the noise of feet in the brush, the splash of flatboats in the water, periodic outbursts of profanity. Occasionally well-dressed, slick-haired Skoons stole into the clearing and looked at the captive Venusians. They prodded them with pointed sticks and laughed among themselves.

Eventually Dale Collins returned, wet and sweating.

"For what it's worth, Curt, your kid got away. But it's thirteen miles to the nearest inhabited island. I don't think even a trained swimmer could make it at night. A pity, too. Your son would have made a fine breeder."

Perhaps a man could not have made the swim, Curt thought; but Benny was a Venusian. He was thoroughly at home in the water. Curt was sorry Benny had run away, but the cowardice seemed excusable. Benny had been born on Venus. He had grown up in the Venusian culture; he had absorbed the social heritage of Venusian lore. Benny shared with the Venusians the shattering Skoon-fear.

Curt hoped Benny would tell Jorgensen and Thayer and Brill what had happened. Perhaps, by some miracle, these three men could finish the alloy of gold and get the escape rocket in the air.

Dale Collins ordered the fire built up again as more and more of his men crowded into the clearing. They were all clothed and combed, all chatting pleasantly in English. Curt counted almost a hundred of them; others lurked deep in the forest shadows. They drove thick, wooden stakes into the ground close to the fire. Collins came and stood beside Curt, smiling out upon the activity.

"The work of trying to bring

back your son made my people hungry, Curt."

"Collins, you're a fool! Do you realize that Mannak is the most important scientist—"

"A lizard genius? That's the kind of curiosity a zoo would pay good money to get."

"A zoo? These are men, Collins!"

"Once, Curt, you and I disagreed over the matter of survival. Remember? You were all for this namby-pamby business of adjusting to the environment. I'm a man, not a lizard. I'll make my world over to suit my ways—not myself to conform to it. I've done exactly that, Curt!" His voice rose to a fever scream and he thrust his contorted face close to Curt's. "Only the strong survive. Look at them, Curt. They're our children. Four of us have put man on Venus. Only four of us, and we'll conquer the planet!"

The last of the wooden stakes was secure in the ground. The Skoons untied the Venusians and bound them to the stakes. Curt fought to reach them, but strong arms held him back.

"Do you know how we did it, Curt?"

"Stop it, Collins! Stop it!"

"We stole Skoon women, Curt—two or three at a time, until we had a pack of fifty. They were good breeder stock. And the children, Curt! They can be educated! They talk English, Curt; they've learned to dress as we do; they think as we do. They've learned our ways. They are men, Curt, and they will rule Venus."

The flames lapped high around the stakes. The Venusians beat futilely at their flaring scales. They screamed in pain.

Curt lashed his fist into Collins' jaw, throwing him back against the ring of spears. Curt sprang through the opening. He bent at a stake, trying to break the ropes that bound Friend Mannak. The Skoons swarmed upon him. A spearhead slashed the skin of his arm. He pulled the weapon from his opponent and used it against the others. Another spear leaped from the darkness. The head buried itself in Curt's leg, just above the kneecap, and the spear shaft broke. Curt staggered and fell. And dragged himself to his feet again. For another minute he held them off before the mob overwhelmed him.

They bound him and rolled him to the side of the clearing, where he lay in the black mud while grime and filth slowly clotted around the spearhead imbedded in his leg. His body throbbed with pain, and his mind with a terrible anguish as he watched the Skoons feast

upon the Venusians. Four hours it lasted—the eating, the savage dancing, and the orgy that followed.

At last the pain and the loss of blood closed a merciful unconsciousness over Curt's mind. He recovered hours later. The gray clouds glowed with the light of day, and Curt still lay neglected and ignored at the side of the clearing. Above him three charred stakes made a gaunt silhouette against the dull sky.

Curt was immensely thirsty; his body pulsed with fever. The flesh around his wounded knee was swollen and black. He lapsed into unconsciousness again.

Still later he was jerked back to awareness by the shrill screaming of terrified voices. A mob of Skoons fled across the clearing. They ran back again, huddling together at the place where the blackened stakes still stood.

Through the trees Curt saw broad, naked shoulders and arms which wielded crudely contrived swords. He recognized Benny and his other sons; Jorgensen, Trayer and Brill, with their sons at their sides. Behind them, sheltered by the sword-bearers, came the Venusians. They closed the ring upon the Skoons. The slaughter was quick and thorough. Dale Collins' wheedling plea for mercy was cut short in his throat as he died.

Through the distorting fog of delirium, Curt vaguely recalled the glider trip back to the capital. The Venusians applied an emergency poultice to his wounded leg, but when doctors in the Experimental Institute examined it, their face scales quivered with sorrow. Curt's wound had gone untended too long. They could save him only by amputation.

Days later Curt lay convalescing on the terrace of his home. A mutter of sing-song voices in the entry-way interrupted his placid dozing. Curt was sitting back against the cushions when Alice led out a delegation from the Governing Council. They made a formal speech of presentation, with typical flourishes of Venusian courtesy, before they gave him the plaque.

He read the rolling script, "The First Citizen of Venus Award."

"A symbol of affection from the people of Venus, Friend Hallen," one of the delegates explained. "From your people. We would be honored, Friend, if you would run as candidate to the Council from your island at the next planetary election. Venus needs the vision and

guidance of such citizens as yourself."

For a long time after they had gone, Curt and Alice sat side by side looking at the plaque. The Venusians were really honoring Benny; Curt knew that. It was custom to make the presentation to the parents. Nonetheless, Curt felt a warm infusion of deep pride.

"From your people, Curt," Alice repeated softly. "That's what they said."

"They've accepted us, Alice—all of us."

"I should hope so! Didn't you fight to save them—"

"The battle with the Skoons had nothing to do with it, my dear. We killed Collins and his mob to save ourselves." Curt glanced at the plaque and smiled. "The survival of the strongest. Only the Venusians—"

"We Venusians, Curt," Alice said gently. "And why not? Venus is our home. It belongs to us. Collins and the Earth-people were trying to take it from us."

Curt lifted himself awkwardly from the lounge, leaning heavily on her shoulder. "Help me down to the lagoon, Alice. I want to see if I can still enjoy a swim."

"A Venusian always will, Curt."

Curt was very weak. After a few minutes, he pulled himself up on the bank where Benny sat playing with his snake. Curt reached out impulsively and stroked Scizzer's head. The snake coiled under Benny's chin, hissing with pleasure.

"You know, Benny," Curt mused. "I've been thinking I ought to get a pet of my own one of these days."

Curt's last ghost of revulsion was gone.

MEN'S MAGAZINES FIND STF GOOD MATERIAL

A recent issue of *HE* Magazine, a pocket-sized man's magazine carried an article on Science Fiction Mags, discussing the current interest in future fact. *HE*'s editor James Collier says response to the story astounded him, despite the fact that he knew there were plenty of STF fans around. Story carried with it the Van Dongen cover of our May issue, quoted publisher John Raymond, "as surely as the planes which science fiction predicted fly through the air of earth today, tomorrow our rockets will drive through space to the frontiers of other planets."

Response being what it was, *HE's* editors plan more STF feature material in the future.

THIS IS THE ESFA

BY SAM MOSKOWITZ

An inside look into one of the country's most prominent fan clubs. Sam Moskowitz, a leader in fan activities for years, is now an editor of a science fiction magazine.

Probably the first national magazine of real repute, to give a serious, carefully considered opinion of the science-fiction field was *Harpers Magazine*. In their issue for September, 1946, William S. Baring-Gould opened a six page analysis of science fiction titled "Little Superman, What Now?" with a quick rundown of the First Post-War Science Fiction Convention, held in Newark, N. J. on March 3, 1946. Baring-Gould had been impressed by the attendance of over one hundred individuals that crowded the small hall, by the efficient, mature sureness with which the proceedings were handled, by the sincerity so manifestly displayed by the scientifictionists present.

Among the featured speakers were Authors L. Sprague de Camp, Robert Arthur (author of the radio show "The Mysterious Traveler"), Manly Wade Wellman; Editors, Sam Merwin, Jr., F. Orlin Tremaine, and C. A. Brandt who worked under Hugo Gernsback on the world's first science-fiction magazine.

The keynote address delivered by Dr. A. Langley Searles, "Is Science Overtaking Science Fiction?" was provocative enough to be picked up and featured by the press.

This auspicious sectional science-fiction gathering was actually the opening gun of a campaign to form a regional science-fiction organization in the New York area, and the profits proved the basis of the treasury which insured the financial success of the Eastern Science Fiction Association.

Prelude to this successful affair was an invitation issued by George R. Fox of Rahway, N. J. for New Jersey science-fiction

fans to meet at his home with the idea of forming a science-fiction organization. A total of five, including Sam Moskowitz, Joe Kennedy, Lloyd Alpaugh and Robert Gaulin attended the organizational meeting and chose the informal title of *Null A Men* to designate their group.

A second informal meeting held at the home of Sam Moskowitz one month later, found the numbers of the group doubled and a formal organization with a hired meeting hall desirable.

A committee of three, composed of Sam Moskowitz, Joe Kennedy and George R. Fox were selected to put on a regional affair to be titled the First Post-War Science Fiction Convention for the purpose of publicity and raising funds to carry on the organization. So successful was the convention that with the net profits of $50.00 to serve as a base, the first organizational meeting was called at the Slovak Sokol Hall in Newark, N. J., on April 28, 1946. Sixteen fans were present, the name the Eastern Science-Fiction Association was officially selected and Sam Moskowitz elected the director of the organization.

From the beginning the club had a large portion of teen-age members, but due to the fact that it was one of the few clubs in the area at that time, and the dependable business-like methods by which it was run, older members were steadily attracted until within a short time there were two definite factions broken into age groups. Still further, a very large percentage of feminine science-fiction fans began to enroll as members. The division of opinion between the two age brackets rested in the fact that the younger members desired the club as a method of self-expression, whereas the older members wanted to have worthwhile programs and discussion. All through the balance of 1946 strong attempts were made to compromise with the younger element, but no satisfactory arrangement could be found. By January, 1947 when club attendance had reached forty, including such well-known older fans as Dr. Thos. S. Gardner, William S. Sykora, James V. Taurasi and Alex Osheroff, it became evident that some departure had to be made to allow the club to show its full potential. Sam Moskowitz, still director, dropped all attempts to reconcile the youthful element and set out to form an organization with a mature program and standards.

For the February, 1947, meeting David H. Keller, M.D., was

brought down from Stroudsburg, Pa., all expenses paid by the club, including meals and hotel bill. An auction of David H. Keller books and manuscripts was held to cover expenses. Keller, who had twice been voted the most popular author of science fiction in a magazine poll conducted by *Wonder Stories* in 1935 and 1936, drew an attendance of 53, the highest attendance of any science-fiction club meeting in history up to that time. Overnight the Eastern Science-Fiction Association became the leading regional fan club in the country. David H. Keller, M.D. delivered a superb address that day, and in attendance was Max J. Herzberg, Literary Editor of the *Newark Evening News*, Principal of Newark's Weequahic High School and one of the nation's leading educators. So impressed was Herzberg, that (ironically for a club that was striving for maturity) he endorsed the organization as educational and posted notices in his school urging attendance by interested pupils.

The March meeting had Murray Leinster as feature speaker, the first time that author had ever attended a meeting of a fan organization. At the same meeting Sam Moskowitz was again reelected to directorship as an endorsement of his policies and the course of the Eastern Science-Fiction Association was set.

The following months saw such outstanding men in the fantasy world as Hannes Bok, artist, Sam Merwin, Jr., then editor of *Startling Stories* and *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, and Alexander M. Phillips and George O. Smith, authors, in the spotlight as guest-speakers at the ESFA.

The success of the club in obtaining outstanding speakers and programs was far from accidental. Unlike almost all other science-fiction clubs, and a large percentage of general organizations throughout the country, the Eastern Science-Fiction Association handled their arrangements for speakers in an intelligent and professional manner. Prospective speakers were written friendly and polite letters of invitation on club stationery and signed by the director. When a prospect agreed to speak, if at all possible, automobile transportation to and from his home, or at least to and from the train or bus stations was arranged. If this was not possible, guides were provided and in some cases the club paid the cost of transportation. The strongest possible effort was always made, regardless of the importance of the speaker, to have a sizable

audience present. Speakers were always treated with the utmost cordiality and politeness and never embarrassed. After the meeting, all speakers were taken down to one of Newark's finest restaurants and dined at the club's expense. Many guests found to their delight that their talks often resulted in newspaper and magazine write-ups arranged by the organization, and sometimes in profitable contacts with editors and publishers. A few days after the meeting they were always sent a letter thanking them for taking the time to deliver the talk. As word of club policies got around it became increasingly easier to get top-ranking scientifictionists to make an appearance at the organization.

Windfall of these policies was the ESFA meeting of September, 1947. At this meeting August W. Derleth, famed publisher and author from Sauk City, Wisconsin, made his only speaking appearance before a science-fiction group up to that time. Though the Philadelphia World Science Fiction Convention had been held only a week before that meeting, Derleth chose to speak at the ESFA because of its outstanding reputation of integrity in its handling of feature guests. Many well-known out-of-state science-fiction fans such as Forrest J. Ackerman, Bob Tucker, Stanley Mullen and Donald M. Grant, made a special point of staying over and taking in this meeting, swelling the attendance to over 70, the largest on record for a regular meeting of a local science-fiction fan organization.

It was decided, as a result, to have a more general meeting the following March, 1948, with a key-note motif. In between, such outstanding authors as Frank Belknap Long and Lester del Rey made speaking appearances at the organization. The key-note of the expanded March meeting was: "The Place of Science Fiction in Modern Society," and various phases of this subject were dealt with by Sam Merwin, Jr., Dr. Edward L. Simons, Asst. Prof. of Chemistry, Rutgers University, Dr. Thomas S. Gardner and Sam Moskowitz. Despite inclement weather an attendance of 85 was obtained, as was considerable publicity.

As can be seen, the basis of the organization's success lay in its powerful monthly programs, but its activities were not merely confined to this. Though throughout the rest of 1948, such outstanding authors and editors as Theodore Sturgeon, David H. Keller, M.D., John W. Campbell, Jr. and L. Ron Hubbard were among those deliver-

ing major addresses to large audiences; there were other activities such as summer picnics, meetings after the meetings held at local restaurants, and science-fiction quizzes whereat the membership was divided into two groups and bombarded with increasingly hard questions until one team emerged the winner.

Throughout its many elaborate programs, the ESFA continued to operate on a pay-as-you-go basis. It refused to exceed its financial capacity and through its members' excellent personal behavior, found a perpetual welcome at the Slovak Sokol Hall, at an incredibly low monthly rate. The treasury had reached a substantial figure and was occasionally added to. The dues were maintained at the low figure of $.35 a month and members were never given any further assessments or asked to sell raffles or other devices used to raise club funds. The membership had reached an overwhelmingly adult level, and the organization had discarded, almost completely, many of the activities usually attributed to the more juvenile fan groups.

Pressure began to grow from various individuals to use the treasury to sponsor elaborate projects or to attempt a World Science Fiction Convention bid. Though the club was amply endowed with experience in the holding of major affairs, most of the qualified members were either employed full-time or family individuals with obligations and therefore were reluctant to assume a project they could not do justice to. In addition to this controversy, the group was finding that many crack-pot fringe undesirables were drifting into membership, due to the complete absence of methods of screening members and the lack of rules governing who might attend. These individuals jeopardized the fine reputation the club had built up.

After the March, 1949 meeting which featured Willy Ley speaking on "The Conquest of Space," Dr. Thomas S. Gardner was elected director to preside over "cleaning house" in the group. There was a stormy six months' period during which few major speakers were invited and the club's problems came to a head and were solved by democratic debate and vote of membership. The idea of sponsoring a world convention was voted down, as were all proposals for disbursal of the treasury funds. Dissidents, in the minority, left the organization and work was begun on tightening up the constitution by framing rules to forestall any

further such difficulty. Though all reforms were not immediate, the club eventually had a screening committee, elected and responsible to the membership, to pass on all applicants for membership. As a result, an increasingly high degree of compatibility was attained within the membership, and by the Fall of 1949, the strong programs, for which the club was renowned, were in full effect again as Sam Merwin, Jr., Rog Phillips, M. Doreal, (head of the White Temple Brotherhood, Sedalia, Colorado), George O. Smith and Jerome Bixby followed in quick succession as speakers.

The expanded March, 1950, meeting represented a peak of club achievement. Hugo Gernsback was announced as the feature speaker. Although Gernsback had published the first science-fiction magazine in America and had helped create science-fiction fandom by promoting the Science Fiction League, through all those years he had steadfastly refused to attend any science-fiction gathering. But so great had the prestige of the Eastern Science-Fiction Association grown, and so distinguished its membership and attendees that he decided, like August W. Derleth before him, that he would make an exception here. Backed by a strong set of companion speakers that included Willy Ley, Sam Merwin, Jr., and L. Jerome Stanton, Gernsback drew one hundred people to the Slovak Sokol Hall.

Greatly impressed by the ESFA's achievement at their March meeting, the Hydra Club of N. Y., a group composed almost entirely of science-fiction professionals, through their chairman, L. Jerome Stanton, asked the ESFA for aid in jointly presenting a three-day science-fiction convention and awards dinner. The ESFA was to be responsible for the program of the formal convention and the Hydra Club for the arrangement of the awards dinner and the major work in publicity, finances and technicalities. Due to illness on the part of L. Jerome Stanton, the Hydra Club had to cancel the awards dinner and the ESFA was asked to fill the gap with additional formal talks.

Nearly two hundred people, many from thousands of miles away, attended the three-day affair at the Henry Hudson Hotel in N. Y. There was some concern that the affair might hurt the annual World Convention scheduled to be held in Portland, Oregon, the following September, but this was resolved to everyone's satisfaction when

no circularization to any extent beyond the Mississippi River was made.

July 1, 1950, the first day, was spent in registration, an evening cocktail party and informal program consisting mainly of the introduction of celebrities presented by the ESFA in the evening.

July 2, 1950, the main formal program began at 12:00 P.M. L. Sprague de Camp and Judith Merrill spoke on "The Literary Aspects of Science Fiction"; Sam Merwin, Jr., Bea Mahaffey and Jerome Bixby composed a panel, moderated by Sam Moskowitz, the chairman of the conference, on "Science-Fiction Magazine Publishing"; Orrin Keepnews, of Simon and Schuster, and Hans Santesson, of the Unicorn Mystery Book Club, engaged in a vigorous debate on "Science-Fiction Book Publishing"; Robert Arthur expounded on "Science-Fiction Programs on the Radio."

After a brief intermission, "Serious Aspects of Science Fiction" were covered by Dr. Thomas S. Gardner speaking on Geriatrics; Isaac Asimov and John R. Pierce, Ph.D. on Robots and Thinking Machines; Dr. J. A. Winter, Dr. David H. Keller and Lester del Rey on Dianetics.

That evening, a science-fiction dinner was held with after-dinner talks by Murray Leinster, Willy Ley, William Tenn and radio producer Sherman Dryer. A giant photograph of this dinner appeared in *Life Magazine* for May 21, 1951, while the New York *Times* devoted an entire column to the conference in general on their editorial page of July 1, 1950.

July 3, Willy Ley spoke on "Rockets," L. Sprague de Camp on "Life in a Space Ship," and Fletcher Pratt on "Military Aspects of Science Fiction."

Despite the work on the Conference, the caliber of the monthly programs did not suffer as through the spring, summer and fall of 1950 such renowned scientifictionists as David H. Keller, M.D., Dr. Thomas S. Gardner, William Tenn, Lester del Rey, Isaac Asimov and James Blish spoke before the club.

Again at the December, 1950 meeting the ESFA came through with a program of such excellence, featuring as speakers Theodore Sturgeon, George O. Smith and Isaac Asimov, that the *New York Sunday News*, world's largest circulated newspaper, gave it a two-page feature spread in their edition for January 14, 1951.

At its meeting of March, 1951 which featured Howard Browne, then editor of *Amazing*

Stories and *Fantastic Adventures* which had just moved to a New York office, the ESFA was the first group to recognize the good work the Fantasy War Veterans were doing in sending science fiction free of charge to the boys in service and donated money from their treasury to encourage the work.

The story of the organization during 1951 was that of a respected, congenial, completely adult and smoothly functioning group. During 1952, the ESFA had one of its greatest years, beginning with its annual expanded March meeting which featured John W. Campbell, Jr., L. Sprague de Camp, Lester del Rey and Sam Merwin, Jr., as speakers, with subsequent meetings that introduced Lilith Lorraine from Mexico, one of the earliest woman science-fiction writers, Arthur C. Clarke, famed British author, David H. Keller, Willy Ley, L. Sprague de Camp and Wallace West.

In October, 1952, Sam Moskowitz, having obtained an editorial position with SCIENCE-FICTION PLUS declined to run for reelection and Allan Howard was elected to the directorship.

The caliber of programs continued without let-down as Paul W. Fairman, Alfred Bester, Fletcher Pratt, Basil Davenport, Robert W. Lowndes, Frank R. Paul, John D. Clark and Dr. John R. Pierce appeared as feature speakers.

The Eastern Science-Fiction Association has become a model for the successful science-fiction fan organization. It is not a closed group, and is open to sincere, mature scientifictionists who are able to attend. Inquiries should be directed to Director Allen Howard, 101 Fairmount Ave., Newark, N. J.

YOUR LAST CHANCE!

IF you are interested in science fiction you should *not* miss the ELEVENTH WORLD SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION. It is taking place in Philadelphia over the Labor Day Weekend, a date that is not too far off. For membership, information and reservations, just send a dollar to The Convention Committee, Eleventh World Science Fiction Convention, Box 2019, Middle City Station, Philadelphia 3, Penna.

IF it is too late for you to write—show up anyway. You'll find *all* the fans, writers, editors and artists at the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel where the convention will take place.

IF you have been to a STF convention before you will need no urging. If this is your first—come and find out what you have been missing.

CLOSED CIRCUIT

BY ROBERT SHECKLEY

ILLUSTRATED BY BERWIN

They were determined to stop Ollin from completing his time machine, while he was equally determined to reach the future. Sometimes, however, things are confused—and the hardest things are the easiest part.

"If you will follow me," the museum guide said, motioning toward the next room, "The exhibit will begin almost immediately."

Veerdus and Gan followed the crowd of sightseers. In the middle of the exhibit room was a small raised platform, which the crowd gathered around. Veerdus didn't have to look up the exhibit in his guide book.

"It's the man from the past," Veerdus said. "You know. The famous one."

"Oh, good," Gan said, smoothing her hair. She wasn't too interested in museums. Shows and dancing were more her idea of a honeymoon, with perhaps a Mars hop to climax it. But it was Veerdus' honeymoon too, and he had always wanted to see the Time Museum.

"I'm so glad we came," Gan said.

"I am too," Veerdus said, smiling at his bride of six hours. "After this we'll go dancing. We'll do anything you like!"

"Shh," Gan said. The guide was speaking.

"Bernard Ollin, the man from the past, is one of the finest exhibits in the Time Museum. Actually, the museum was constructed around him." The guide glanced at his watch, then back to the crowd. "Can everyone see? There's more room over there, sir . . . Fine. The man from the past will appear in exactly three minutes, upon that platform."

"I've read all this," Veerdus said.

"Shh," Gan said again. "I haven't."

"When he appears," the guide was saying, "Note especially the details of 20th century dress. Technically, his ensemble is called a 'suit', although—"

But Gan wasn't listening now. She gave Veerdus a sidelong glance.

"Love me?" she whispered.

"You bet," Veerdus answered softly.

The vacuum tube had been lying motionless on the table for half an hour. Now, for no apparent reason, it started rolling toward the edge. Bernard Ollin caught it before it fell, held it a moment uncertainly, then put it in a drawer.

Let *them* try to break it now!

He returned to the control panel of his time machine. The machine was divided into two sections. One, designed to send Ollin into the future, would remain in his cellar. The other, smaller unit, would accompany him into the future. This unit would enable him to return to the past.

The two units were compact, like Ollin himself. And like Ollin, they had a look of savage, monomaniacal efficiency.

Ollin finished setting the last dial with abrupt, precise movements. He scowled happily at the result; then a flutter of motion caught the corner of his eye. He glanced at a bundle of wires at the base of the control panel. An uninsulated lead had torn loose from its contact, and was bending toward another wire two feet away.

Ollin wanted to swear, but an habitual taciturnity made him clench his jaws together. He nipped the wire back with a pair of insulated pliers, and wound it securely in place.

They were clever, he thought. If the wires had touched, several months work would have burned out.

The wire hadn't just come loose. He had soldered it into place himself. Just as the vacuum tube hadn't just "happened" to roll.

They were still trying to stop him.

And very hard they had tried in the last hour. Circuits had mysteriously been altered, settings changed. Trace elements had gotten into his sealed solutions. Anything, to keep him out of the future.

Why, he asked himself. But there was no answer.

Ollin took the vacuum tube out of the drawer, almost dropping it as it slid—or was pushed through his fingers. He maintained his grip, clamping his jaws together until his teeth ached, and plugged the tube into place.

He glanced again at his settings and unceremoniously threw the main switch.

There was a sensation of vertigo, movement—and then it stopped. He was still in the cellar.

Again he tried. This time, he could feel a definite opposing force, as though a giant hand were pushing him back.

He switched off the main current and checked his machines. Everything was in order.

The third time he failed again. Bernard Ollin unclamped his mouth long enough to spit on the floor. *They* were responsible, of course. Unseen presences had been persecuting him since childhood. These people—whom he referred to only as *they*—were always interfering with his experiments, hindering him. Now they had used some force, to oppose the force of his machine.

Ollin had decided, long ago, that a concerted effort was being made to keep him out of the future. It had started when he was ten, playing with his chemistry set, and had continued through high school and college. Never was it more obvious than now.

This certainty had reinforced Ollin's determination to make his machine work.

They!

Suddenly, Ollin closed the switch again. Instantly he felt the vertigo of movement. There was no opposing force this time He closed his eyes and clenched his fists.

A gasp went up from the crowd, and the guide smiled. Ollin's sudden appearance, his strained body materializing from nothing, never failed to thrill the sightseers. Dutifully the guide went on with his prepared talk.

"Bernard Ollin, the man from the past, is now before you. He can not see or hear you. Note especially the dazed expression on his face, the trace of hopelessness. All Ollin sees is a grayness, featureless and without end. This is because—" The guide went into a glib explanation of time-travel theory.

"The haircut of this man," the guide went on, leading his listeners into more familiar paths, "Is fairly typical of his age. Long in front, clipped short in back. Long front hair, in the 20th century, was popularly supposed to denote an artistic or scientific type, although—"

The guide talked about the customs of Ollin's age, while the crowd stared at the bewildered man.

"He looks so unhappy," Gan

said, holding Veerdus' hand. "Look at his face!"

The crowd held their collective breath, looking at the tense, over-stimulated, brutish face of 20th century man.

"He's looking around now," Veerdus said. "The guidebook says he has a persecution-fear."

The guide was talking about that, so they listened.

"This man's persecution-fear," the guide said, "is not entirely unfounded, as you all must know. At this point he doesn't suspect the true nature of that persecution. He believes that persons from the future are, and have been, trying to hinder him."

"Oh, look," Gan said. "He's trying to return to his own time now. He's pushing the button. Oh!"

She clutched Veerdus' hand tightly. The man from the past had pushed the return button. When nothing happened, the expression on his face was terrible.

When nothing happened, Ollin felt as though a bottomless pit had opened in his stomach. Was he caught here, in this meaningless limbo? What had happened?

He set the dial again, and pushed the button.

This time he distinctly felt a counter-force moving against him.

So *they* were still around. Ollin decided that he must have done a forbidden thing. Perhaps there were laws against time-travel, enforced by some unimaginable creatures. They had tried to keep him in his own time. Failing, they were going to keep him in the future.

Ollin's iron control started to crumble as he stared into the mist. The more he considered it, the more he was certain that that was the right answer. He wasn't going to be allowed to bring his knowledge back to his own world.

Ollin emitted a sound, between a cry and a snarl, and shoved the button again.

Still he was in the gray nothingness. He bit his lip hard, and sat down to think.

"I know you will all be interested in Ollin's thought-processes," the guide said. "So if you will look at the screen overhead, we are flashing his associations."

Everyone looked up. On a screen a series of words were moving colored for emotional content. Beside the main stream of thoughts other associations started, and faded away. Emotions, represented only as colors, flashed across the edges of the screen.

"Lost — lost — persecution —

damn them—way out—nature of time—"

"Note," the guide continued, "The random character of his associations at this point. And yet, already apparent are the threads of truth."

"Did people really think that way?" Gan asked, amazed at the connotations of some of the words.

"All of the time," Veerdus told her.

"But the sexual content—"

"He couldn't help himself," Veerdus said.

Gan shook her head. She, like everyone else, had conscious control of every thought she was capable of. When she wanted to think about sex, she thought about it. But only then.

It was hard to imagine a person thinking of sex even when they really *didn't* want to.

"His associations are changing now," the guide said. "Note the key words — interplay — change—stasis—and how he interweaves them."

"This is really interesting," Gan said. She had never imagined that something as dry and academic as time-travel could have dramatic possibilities.

"Look," Veerdus said, pointing at the screen. "Those underlying patterns, the fading ones. They must be rejected solutions."

"Ollin has reached a course of action," the guide said. "He has examined his immediate possibilities. He knows that he cannot go into an alternate future, because the controls for future movements are in his cellar."

The man from the past seemed to be staring right at them, Gan thought.

"He cannot take up his life in another past, for reasons explained in his theory of time—which, by the way, is still accepted as generally valid."

"Why can't he?" someone near the guide asked.

"To put it as simply as possible," the guide replied, "Ollin is in a circuit between his present and this point. His influence extends along his entire past life-line, of course. But because of the circuit, he cannot—*live*—in any time except his own."

"Then why can't he—" the man began, but the guide interrupted him.

"I'll gladly answer your question later, sir. Now I'd like to explain what he is going to do." The guide smiled, and went back to his prepared talk. "Ollin has, accordingly, decided to try to exert an influence on his own development. He reasons that by altering certain emergent points in his life, he can prevent himself from ever making the time machine, thus releasing him

from his present intolerable situation."

On the platform, Bernard Ollin disappeared.

"That man's face," Gan said. "I'll never forget it."

"He will reappear in about five minutes," the guide said. "I will be glad to answer questions during the interval."

"I've got one," Veerdus said, raising his hand.

Bernard Ollin, age ten, squatted on the floor of his room. In front of him was a chemistry set, with test tubes neatly arranged in their holders.

Ollin was following one of the experiments in the booklet that came with the set. Or he had been following it. Something told him that it might be interesting if he added a little more of *this*, instead of quite a lot of *that*.

What a funny reaction!

Ollin stared at the test tube wide-eyed. Then he thumbed through the booklet to find what he had done.

The booklet didn't say anything about it. And now the solution was changing again, in the strangest way.

This was really something, young Ollin said to himself. Now what would happen if—

Ollin's father came in quietly, and looked over his son's shoulder. Mr. Ollin felt that his son should be out playing, instead of messing with chemicals all day long. But he wasn't going to interfere. He leaned farther, to see what the boy was up to—

And something seemed to push him. In any event Mr. Ollin stumbled, reached out for balance, and knocked over the test tube.

"Oh, dad!" the boy said, in an agonized voice. He ignored his father's apologies, trying to figure out just what chemicals he had mixed. He thought for a few seconds, then nodded to himself.

It would take time, but he would mix that solution again.

Bernard Ollin, fourteen years old, remixed the solution in his workshop in the family garage. He hooked a battery to it, and frowned at what was happening. Ollin's face was already set in its customary scowl.

The boy took a magnet out of his tool box and set it up near the solution. Then he changed its position. Then he changed it again.

The result was unexpected, and very interesting. Ollin wrote it down in a school notebook, then adjusted the magnet a quarter of an inch closer.

He heard a sound, and looked up.

The garage was used by his father as a store house. On the rafters were skis, pieces of canvas, old tools, chairs—odds and ends that his father had no other place for. Something seemed to have nudged a chair loose from its position between two beams. Fascinated, the boy watched it fall.

At the last moment he ducked out of the way. The metal chair smashed across his tubes and battery. The solution ran over his scrawled notes, obliterating them.

The boy swore angrily, then clamped his mouth shut. This, he told himself, was no accident. It couldn't be!

He found fresh paper and doggedly wrote down all he could remember.

The first equations for time travel were emerging.

Bernard Ollin, twenty years old, was unpopular among his fellow students at college. He spent all his spare time in the physics lab, working at some crackbrained theory or another. His physics instructor tolerated him. Ollin was allowed to dabble, as long as he paid for any breakage.

But this day the physics teacher didn't feel so tolerant. His wife had been sarcastic at breakfast. The head of the physics department had passed him without his usual cool nod. And he had barked his ankle painfully, walking into the physics lab.

With distaste he viewed Ollin's equipment, littering most of the available space.

"You'll have to straighten up this mess," he said testily, wondering why the head of the department hadn't nodded to him. Could he have done something wrong?

"I've almost finished one stage," the young man said. He had been soldering some wires into a machine of some sort. The hot soldering iron was still in his hand.

"I don't know why you—" The teacher howled with pain. The soldering iron had fallen out of Ollin's hand, onto his wrist.

"Get this damned junk out of here!" the teacher shouted. "You'll blow this place up!"

"But sir—" Ollin began. How could he explain that the iron had been pushed out of his hand? How could he tell him about the unseen presences persecuting him? About *them?*

"Get it out," the teacher said, in a firm tone he should have used with his wife an hour earlier.

"Now," the guide said, "Ollin has moved into his own present.

Failing to stop himself anywhere along the line, he is making his last attempt. He is pushing a vacuum tube off the table, hoping that he won't be able to get another. Invisible, he is trying to fuse two wires on the machine."

"But doesn't he realize the truth yet?" someone asked.

"He hasn't had a chance," the guide said. "He has been too intent on what he's doing. But in a moment he will realize the failure of this particular endeavor. With that will come insight."

As they watched, the man from the past appeared again.

"He looks very tired," Gan said.

"He is," Veerdus said. "Just look at that face!" In Ollin's face everyone could see themselves—brutalized. It was a caricature of a human face.

"Everyone looked like that then," Veerdus reminded Gan. She took his hand again.

"Here are the associations again," the guide said. "Watch now. This is a pretty bit of reasoning."

The words began to race across the screen. "Myself—all along — myself — closed — unalterable—"

"Look," Veerdus said. "There's the point of absolute conviction. He knows that he is his only persecutor."

"I can read," Gan said. But she squeezed his hand, to apologize for being snappy.

In the grayness of the future, Ollin realized that there had been no unseen presences—only himself. He had been the one who had tried to stop the experiments. His own persecutor!

But what did it mean? Was he trapped forever in this gray future?

No. There was something he had left out.

"I tried to get into the future," he said out loud, "And I met a resisting force. What was that force?"

After a moment he had the answer.

"That force was myself also," he decided. "My attempt to get into the future was nullified by myself, trying to get *out* of the future. The forces cancelled."

Hmm. Complicated. He tried to visualize it as a diagram. There had been three unsuccessful attempts to get into the future. Let that be three horizontal arrows, one under another.

Now then. Opposing those, nullifying them were three other arrows. They represented the times he had tried to get from the future to the past.

"Those three balanced each other," he said out loud. "For each attempt in the past, a simultaneous attempt in the future. And vice versa."

He scratched his head. That was all very well. Now, how had he gotten in?

Draw a fourth arrow, under the three in the past. There is no opposition to that arrow. Continue it around, and hook it up with the first of the future series. That represents me, in position to try to return to the past.

And then he had it!

In that case, my fourth attempt in the future will be unopposed, just as my fourth attempt in the past! The fourth arrow will bring me back!

He laughed, and pushed the button.

The man from the past vanished.

"The poor man," Gan said.

"Let's look around the rest of the museum while we're here," Veerdus said. "There are some remarkable things here. The Catamaro, and the three-in-three—"

"I knew it," Gan said. "I just knew it."

"That's that, folks," the guide was saying. "There is a full explanation in your guide book, plus a detailed analysis of the Ollin theory of time. But to sum up—"

"I promise we'll dance all night," Veerdus said. "We'll tour the solar system. If you'll just—"

"I'd love to see the three-in-three," Gan said, although she didn't have the slightest idea what it was.

"To sum up," the guide went on, "You have seen the complete time circuit, closed and unalterable. Who knows when this man will be set free? Not until the very fabric of time is worn thin!"

Gan looked at Veerdus, and allowed herself the luxury of a single sexual thought. It was very enjoyable. But she stopped there. Time for that later. Now, she would concentrate on the three-in-three.

Behind them, the guide's voice was saying, "The man from the past will be back in two hours and sixteen minutes. This exhibit is open weekdays and Saturdays until two."

The vacuum tube had been lying motionless on the table for half an hour. Now, for no apparent reason, it started rolling toward the edge. Ollin caught it before it fell, held it a minute uncertainly, then put it in a drawer.

Let *them* try to stop him now!

BOOK REVIEWS:

THE DISSECTING TABLE

by DAMON KNIGHT

LIMBO, by Bernard Wolfe. Random House, 438 pp., $3.50. • Bernard Wolfe is the outhor of a best-selling non-fiction book, *Really the Blues* (Random House, 1946); science-fiction readers, I hope, will remember him better os the man who wrote *Self Portrait*, one of 1951's most brilliont short novelettes. Those who have Gnome's recent anthology, *The Robot ond the Mon*, on hand might reread this story, for reasons which will be cleor in a moment and for its own soke; it's o beautiful piece of writing.

After people, these are the subjects with which *Self Portrait* is most concerned:

cybernetics in general
prosthetics and EMSIAC (Electronic Militory Strategy Integrator and Computer) in particulor
wor as a "steamroller"
"moral substitutes" for war, including voluntary amputeeism. " 'Marx corrected by Freud . . . to each according to his (masochistic) need.' "

These are also the subjects of *Limbo*. I don't know whether the novelette preceded the novel, or, as seems equolly likely, wos written while the larger work was under way; at ony rate, although the times, ploces, people and incidents are all different, I think it's clear thot both are parts of the same story.

Limbo is o big-scale, exuberant, pyrotechnic, high-powered giant of a book; it is guaranteed to do something to you—excite, irritote, stimulate, onger or bore you, or all five in swift succession. It will not leave you indifferent—the one thing it is not is an artistic success, o rounded, symmetricol thing-in-itself like *Self Portroit*.

The reoson is partly o question of focus. *Self Portrait* is told from the viewpoint of an utterly humorless, clever-stupid cybernetics engineer named Oliver Parks, o frighteningly comic figure, o buffoon with power.

Nothing hos to be stated, Wolfe's moral is cleor: o man like Parks is copable of creating Frankenstein's monster because he *is* the monster; because he has no soul.

But in *Limbo* Wolfe wonted to explore oll the possibilities hinted at in *Self Portrait*, and to do it he needed o spokesman who could be on stage all the time; he chose Dr. Martine, o young broin surgeon who flees the EMSIAC war, leoving behind o notebook full of gollows humor; spends 18 years omong o tribe of primitive lobotomists, and returns to civilization to find thot another Porks, reading the notebook, has manoged to translate its jokes into reolity: Immob ("No Demobilization Without Immobilization") ond Vol-amp ("Arms Or the Mon").

The trouble with Martine is just that he is o spokesmon; although the author works hard to give him human faults and foilings, he is inevitably St. George vs. the drogon, Dr. Christion vs. the town gossips, Hopalong Cossidy vs. the rustlers; he is sometimes interesting, sometimes not, but he's never believoble.

Again, the trouble lies portly in the scale of the book: it's o panoramic novel and o synthetic novel of ideas; it's over four hundred closely printed pages long; half the length has before now been enough to make o polished short-story writer come o cropper. The novel is not an easy form, even if you play sofe and treod corefully in your predecessor's footsteps, ond Wolfe has done nothing of the sort. EMSIAC, Immob ond Vol-omp ore foscinoting in themselves: Wolfe encysts them with lavish, intricate mosses of philosophical apology ond onolysis, os luminous os onything in Koestler; the book is thoroughly peppered with puns, at leost half of them good, ond with sniper's shots ot olmost every target in our intellectual climote, oll poetic and penetrating.

This isn't o book for everybody, os you will have gathered if you've read many of its reviews. I think thot, for as it falls short of perfection, it's o great achievement.

* * *

Footnote to publishers: The inside jacket copy provided for this novel, like most jocket copy, is obominably bod. One thing I forgot to mention in my hymn of praise for Twayne's *Witches Three* wos its urbane and witty travesty on the blurb-writer's art; this was one oasis in a desert of superficial idiocies. In porticulor, I hove this complaint to make: I don't mind blurb writers' asking questions; I do mind their osking *themselves* questions in print.

If the copywriter can't begin to evaluate the book, and Lord knows this is frequent enough, surely he ought to turn the job over to someone who can?

BEYOND HUMAN KEN, edited by Judith Merril. Random House, 334 pp., $2.95 • In the Carrolian universe inhabited by those who have to do with the making and selling of books, ingenious paradoxes abound. For example, it is a well-tested axiom that book buyers detest short stories (hence the frequency of the label "novel" on volumes which are no more novels than *Fanny Farmer's Boston Cooking School Cook Book*); but it is at least equally Beautiful and True that book buyers who receive fewer than about twenty stories in any collection feel they are being cheated.

It will readily be seen that, since 100,000 words make a long book, every novelette in an ordinary anthology will have to be paid for with a short-short, or two or three. In the present collection Miss Merrill has paid the price: there are four novelettes, nine short stories of average length, and eight, or far too many, stories shorter than 4,500 words.

Luckily for the book-buyer, languishing in his own hand-made Iron Maiden, Judy Merril's ingenuity is considerable, her industry unflagging, her taste impeccable. This is a brilliant collection, unified in theme, diverse in subject; it contains such never-before-anthologized plums as Robert A. Heinlein's *Our Fair City*, Theodore Sturgeon's *The Perfect Host*, William Tenn's *The House Dutiful* and Lester del Rey's immortal *Helen O'Loy*. All four of the novelettes rate excellent on my scale (Padgett, Heinlein, Boucher, Sturgeon) and so do six of the shorter stories—ten A's out of 21; plus seven B's and only four stinkers, three of them in the short-short group.

In addition, the editor's notes on each story are fluent, perceptive and good-humored; Fletcher Pratt has contributed a praiseworthy introduction, and Random House has done the production up brown—binding, typography, jacket design, even the jacket blurb is unexceptionable. Cover to cover, this is a volume you'll be glad you've bought.

FANTASY CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM, by Alastair Cameron. Available from Canadian Science Fiction Association, 54 Ellesmere Avenue, St. Vital, Manitoba, Canada. Mimeographed; edition limited to 500 numbered copies.

(I haven't included the price, above, because it doesn't appear on the book itself, and the accompanying letter from the publisher has got itself lost somewhere on my horrible desk. If anybody is willing to

trust my memory, he may send one dollar to the address given; and if that isn't right, I'll apologize to everybody concerned.)

This one is for fanatical collectors and fanatical students of the art. Mr. Cameron appears to be both; his work is scholarly, painstakingly detailed and admirably compact. What he has set out to do is nothing less than to create a system of divisions and subdivisions which will adequately account for every theme, subject and method of attack in the whole of science fiction and fantasy—a thing which has been attempted before, notably by Jack Speer, but never, I'm certain, with such admirable results. Cameron himself does not claim complete success, but as far as I've been able to test the system I've found it astonishingly complete and flexible; I tried it on several stories I felt certain would resist classification; but they didn't.

The system disposes of subject matter through a series of numbers and operational symbols arranged in decimal order; this is followed by a "literary information profile," using letters of the alphabet, which classifies the story as to length, plot category, stress, and so on. In most cases the resulting capsule of information is quite brief; to quote one of Cameron's own examples, Jack Williamson's *Darker Than You Think* boils down to "14.2:99.4deudbx," which, retranslated, means, "Werebeasts are able to control the laws of probability; 50,000 to 105,000 words; hero's aims frustrated; action appeal; emphasis on plot; fantasy important; there are no subsidiary considerations."

Besides a complete catalogue of the system itself, this volume contains an excellent index, and notes by the author on such subjects as *The Definition of Fantasy* (a particularly acute treatment of this much-mooted problem), *The Theory of a Classification System,* & c.

Given its wide adoption, it seems to me that this system would add immensely to the value of such volumes as the *Checklist of Fantastic Literature*. The author suggests that, besides, it "should be of interest to the average fantasy fan as a reasonably complete compilation of the topics in his field of interest," and that for writers "there is a wealth of fantasy stories waiting to be suggested by combinations of various classification numbers." I doubt this last very much; the germinal idea of a science-fantasy story is likely to be just what this compilation can't supply, a new variation on one of the old themes, or a linking idea that joins two of them in a new way. But for bibliographers, bibliophiles and for all those interested in what science-fantasy is and what makes it tick, this book is unreservedly recommended.

POLICE YOUR PLANET

BY ERIK VAN LHIN

ILLUSTRATED BY ORBAN

No matter how bad things are, they can always get worse. And on the corrupt, brawling, police-ridden world of Mars, Bruce Gordon found that the simplest solutions were the hardest.

[CONCLUSION]

SYNOPSIS: Bruce Gordon *is exiled to Mars for revealing conditions on Mercury in his newspaper column against Solar Security's wishes. He plans to return illegally, but finds it tough. At the home of* Mother Corey, *a monstrous man too well acquainted with crooks, he meets* Honest Izzy, *a little knife expert. They buy positions on the corrupt police force. Graft is good, but kickbacks keep him down to less than a hundred credits. And he runs into constant trouble with* Sheila Corey, *gang moll granddaughter of Mother Corey.*

Gordon is sent outside the dome which maintains airpressure over the better section, into the slums, to work under Captain Whaler. But they ruin a gang needed by Mayor Wayne in the coming elections, and Gordon is assigned to work under Captain Isaih Trench. During elections, Whaler turns out to be a Security agent. He is nearly killed by Trench, renegade from Security, but saved by Gordon. Dying, he tells Gordon hell is brewing, and makes Gordon chief of Security on Mars. Sheila steals the notebook with information, however.

Gordon locates Sheila, but not the notebook. To keep her from showing it to Trench, he marries her and locks her into an adjoining room, though he's sorry enough for her to buy her decent clothes. Then three ships from Earth land, and announce that the election was illegal, and they are now going to police the

ORBAN

city of Marsport. They call themselves Legals, as opposed to the Municipal cops. Izzy joins the Legals, but Trench raises Gordon to captain's rank.

In a fight with the Legals, Gordon is knocked out, but not before he sees Sheila rushing out of the house and toward him with a weapon. Trench is also running up. And in his pouch is a badge proclaiming him head of Security—evidence enough for Trench to have him killed. He comes to momentarily to find Sheila and Trench dragging him somewhere, but then blacks out again.

XII

Something cold and damp against his forehead brought Gordon part way out of his unconsciousness finally. There was the softness of a bed under him and the bitter aftertaste of Migrainol on his tongue. He tried to move, but nothing happened. The drug killed pain, but only at the expense of a temporary paralysis of all voluntary motion.

There was a sudden withdrawal of the cooling touch on his forehead, and then hasty steps that went away from him, and the sound of a door closing. He fought against the paralysis and managed to open one eye. He was in his own bed, obviously partly undressed, since his uniform lay on the chair beside him. The pouch was on top and partly open, but he couldn't see whether the Security badge was still safe.

Steps sounded from outside, and his eyes suddenly shut again. The drug was wearing off, but he still had no real control, and couldn't reopen them. The steps reached the door; it opened, and there was the sound of two men crossing the room, one with the heavy shuffle of Mother Corey. But it was the voice of Honest Izzy he heard first.

"No wonder the boys couldn't find where you'd stashed him, Mother. Must be a bloody big false section you've got in that trick mattress of yours!"

"Big enough for him and for Trench, Izzy," Mother Corey's wheezing voice agreed. "Had to be big to fit me. Of course, I'm respectable now—but a poor old man never knows . . ."

"You mean you hid Trench out, too?" Izzy asked. "I thought you had that gee pegged as a dome hole?"

There was a thick chuckle and the sound of hands being rubbed together. "A respectable landlord has to protect himself, Izzy. For hiding and a convoy back, our Captain Trench gave

me a paper with immunity from the Municipal forces. Used that with a bit of my old reputation to get your Mayor Gannet to give me the same from the Legals. Didn't want Mother Corey to think the Municipals were kinder than the Legals, and maybe joining forces. So you're in the only neutral territory in Marsport. Not that you deserve it."

"Lay off, Mother," Izzy said sharply. "I told you I had to do it. I didn't owe the Municipals anything. Who paid me? The gees on my beat did—and the administration got a cut on my collection. I take care of the side that pays my cut, and the bloody administration pulled the plug on my beat twice. So I hadda switch sides and hope maybe Gannett's crowd was some better. Only honest thing to do was to join the Legals."

"And get your rating up to a lieutenant," Mother Corey observed. "Without telling cobber Gordon!"

"Like I say, honesty pays, Mother- when you know how to collect. Hell, I figured Bruce would do the same. He's the right gee."

Mother Corey seemed to hesitate. Then he chuckled without humor. "Yeah, quite a man. When he forgets he's a machine. How about a game of shanks?"

The steps moved away, and the door closed again. Gordon mentally spat out the Mother's last words. This time he got both eyes open and managed to sit up. The effects of the drug were almost gone, but it took a straining of every nerve to force his body forward enough to reach his uniform pouch. His fingers were clumsy and uncertain as he fumbled inside, groping back and forth for a badge that wasn't there!

A cold shock ran up his spine as he dropped back wearily. Trench had apparently been hidden with him in a false section of Mother Corey's bed, and the Captain hadn't missed the chance. It made everything complete. Sheila was free to spill what she knew on him, he was practically helpless here, and the Municipals were probably ready to shoot him on sight as a Security man. Trench had probably slipped word to the Legals that he'd killed Earth's Captain Whaler, just to make it complete!

He heard the door open softly, but made no attempt to look up. The reaction from his effort had drained him, and the sound probably only meant that Izzy had come back to tuck him in for the night.

Fingers touched his head carefully, brushing the hair

back delicately from the side of his skull. Then there was the biting sting of antiseptic, sharp enough to bring a groan from his lips. He forced his eyes open, to see Sheila bending over him, her hair over her face as she bent to replace the bandages on his wound. Her being back made no sense, but he accepted it suddenly with a queer lift of spirits and an almost instant disgust at his own reaction.

Her eyes wandered toward his, and the scissors and bandages on her lap hit the floor as she jumped to her feet. She turned toward her room, then hesitated as he grinned crookedly at her: "Hi, Cuddles," he said flatly.

She bit her lips and turned back, while a slow flush ran over her face. Her voice was uncertain. "Hello, Bruce. You okay?"

The normality of the words jarred him, but he let it go. "How long have I been like this?"

"Fifteen hours, I guess. It's almost midnight." She bent over to pick up the bandages and to finish with his head. Her fingers were clever at it—more so than his own as he explored the swelling there. "Are you hungry? There's some canned soup—I took the money from your pocket. Or coffee . . ."

"Coffee," he said. He forced himself up again, noticing that most of the drug's effects were already gone. Sheila propped the flimsy pillow behind him, then went into her room to come back with a plastic cup filled with brown liquid that passed for coffee here. It was loaded with caffeine, at least, and brought new life to his body.

He sat on the narrow two-by six bunk, studying her. The years of Mars' half life still showed. But in a decent dress and with better cosmetics, most of the cheapness was gone. He knew that the voluptuous curves covered muscles capable of killing a man, and that the prettiness of her face hid a mind completely unpredictable. But with the badge gone, and probably all Mars against him, he had to find some way of using any help he could get.

Maybe he should have spent more time on Earth learning about women, he thought, and then grimaced. There had been women enough, of a sort—but something in him had scared off the ones that might have offered any chance for normal relationships. It wasn't experience he lacked, but something inside himself.

"Why'd you come back?" he asked suddenly. "You were

anxious enough to pick the lock and get out."

She brought her eyes up slowly, her face whitening faintly. "I didn't pick it—you forgot to lock it."

He couldn't remember what he'd done after he found the badge, but it was possible. He nodded doubtfully. "Okay, my mistake. But why the change of heart?"

"Because I needed a meal ticket!" she said harshly. Her hands lay on her lap, clenched tightly. "What else could I do after what you've done to me? Do you think *decent* people would have anything to do with me? Or that my own kind would, after they heard I'd married the iron cop who beats up hoods for breakfast and makes Izzy and the Mother go straight? You've got a reputation, and it's washed off on me. Big joke! I always knew I'd have to kill you for the rotten devil you are inside. Then, when I see that Legal cop ready to take you, I have to go running out to save you! Because I don't have the iron guts to starve like a Martian!"

It rocked him back on his mental heels. He'd been thinking that she had been attacking him on the street; but it made more sense this way, at that. So he owed her his life, the fact that he was here instead of out on the street with his throat cut open and his ribs caved in. And now she was set to collect his gratitude!

"You're a fool!" he told her bitterly. "You bought a punched meal ticket. You never had enough sense to come in out of the wet! Right now I probably have six death warrants out and about as much chance of making a living as . . ."

"I'll stick to my chances. I don't have any others now." She grimaced. "You get things done. Now that you've got a wife to support, you'll support her. Just remember, it was your idea."

He'd had a lot of ideas, it seemed. "I've got a wife who's holding onto a notebook that belongs to me, then. Where is it?"

She shook her head. "It's safe, where nobody will find it. I'll cook for you, I'll help you whenever I can. I'll swallow your insults. But in case that isn't enough, I'm keeping the notebook for insurance. Blackmail, Bruce. You should understand that! And you won't find it, so don't bother looking."

His mind twisted over the facts he knew on her, looking for an angle to force her hand. The badge was gone; the notebook might be useless now. But he couldn't overlook any bets. Suddenly he reached out to catch her wrist. "It might be fun

looking," he told her. Then, because the attempted amusement didn't quite cover a thickness in his throat, he jerked her forward. "Come here!"

"You filthy pig!" She avoided his lips, and her hand darted to the place where a knife should be. Her eyes blazed from the whiteness of her face. The hooked fingers of her other hand came up to claw his head, touched the bandage, and dropped. The straining tenseness went out of her as quickly as it had come. "All right. I—I swore I'd kill any man who touched me, but I guess I asked for this. Okay, I'm your wife. Bruce, all *right!* Only give me a minute first."

Surprised, he released her. Now she stumbled across the room toward her own. But the door didn't slam behind her. Instead, there was the rustle of clothes. A minute later, Sheila came back, forcing herself a step at a time. The dress was gone now, replaced by the negligée, and her hair had been brushed back hastily. It showed beads of sweat glistening on her forehead.

"My first—husband . . . he . . . I *had* to kill him!" she said hoarsely. The effort of speech left her throat muscles tense under the beating arteries. Her eyes were still dark with fear, but now there was an odd pleading in them. "Bruce, don't remind me of *him!* Pretend—pretend this is a real marriage, that you like me—that you think I'm . . . pretty in the trousseau you bought me. And I'll tell you what I wanted to say when you first gave it all to me . . ."

She swung about, awkwardly at first, and then quickly to display the clothes. The negligée swirled out, revealing smooth limbs and bits of lace and silky fabric.

Gordon stood up and moved toward her without conscious volition. "You're beautiful, Cuddles," he said hoarsely, and this time he meant it. She met his eyes and moved hesitantly into his arms, while her mouth opened slightly and tilted to meet his. Her arms tightened.

But it was only a pretense. Her body was unresisting, but like a dead thing, and her lips were motionless, while her eyes remained open and glazed. She began to tremble in slow shudders. He tightened his arms slowly, trying to awaken some response in her. His arms moved to draw her closer, and then were alive and demanding on her back.

And suddenly she jerked and her mouth opened in a thin, agonized scream!

It hit him like an ice bath,

and he stepped back, dropping to his bed while she sank limply into the chair. His hands found a cigarette, and he burned his lungs on a long, aching drag of smoke. Finally he grimaced and shrugged. "All right, Cuddles," he said. "Forget it!"

"Bruce . . ."

"Forget it. Go to bed. I'm not interested in the phony act of a frigid woman!"

She stood up, with her face a death mask and her hands making motions like those of an Aztec priest tearing the heart from a living victim. Her colorless lips parted to show clenched teeth as she tried to speak. "You damned ghoul! You mechanical monster!"

Words boiled up in him as she swung toward her room. He opened his mouth . . .

And the words vanished under the shock of the red stain he saw spreading down the back of the negligée.

He caught her before she reached the door and swung her around, ripping the garment back from her shoulder. There was a rough bandage there, but blood was seeping from beneath it. He lifted it, to stare at an ugly six-inch gash that ran down her back where his hands had been.

She shook free of his grasp and pulled the clothes back quickly. "Yes," she said, in a low, tired voice. "That's why I screamed. The Legal wasn't quite dead when I pulled you out from under. And I don't welch on my bargains—ever! Can I go, now?"

"After I bandage that." He turned back to where the bandages lay and began fumbling for them. But her voice cut off his motions, and he swung to face her.

"Bruce!" She was through the door, holding onto it, and now she caught his glance with hers and held it. "Bruce, forget the cut. There are other things . . ."

"It might get infected."

She sighed, and her lips tightened. "Oh, go to hell!" she said, and shut the door. There was the sound of the lock being worked, and then silence.

He stared at the door foolishly, swearing at all women and at the whole stinking planet. Then he grimaced. Until he was on a better planet, he'd have to face his problems here—and there were plenty of them to face, without Sheila. He started for the door, grunted in self-disgust, and turned back to the chair where his uniform still lay. He could stay here fighting with her, or he could face his troubles on the outside, and maybe bull through somehow. The whole thing hinged on what

Trench did with the badge and about him. And unless Trench had shown it to others, his problem boiled down to a single man.

Gordon found one tablet of painkiller left in the bottle and swallowed it with the dregs of the coffee. He still felt lousy, but events never waited on a man's feelings. He'd already been here too long. Anyhow, it wasn't the first time he'd been knocked out and had to come up fighting on the count of nine.

He made sure his knife was in its sheath and that the gun at his side was loaded. He found his police club, checked the loop at its end, and slipped it onto his wrist.

At the door to the hall, he hesitated, staring at Sheila's room. Wife or prisoner? He turned it over in his mind, knowing that her words couldn't change the facts. But in the end, he dropped the key and half his money beside her door, along with a spare knife and one of his guns. If he came back, he'd have to worry about it then; and if he shouldn't make it, at least she'd have a fighting chance.

He went by Izzy's room without stopping, uncertain of his status now. Technically, the boy was an enemy to all Municipals. This might be neutral territory, but there was no use pressing it. Gordon went down the stairs and out through the seal onto the street entrance, still in the shadows.

His eyes covered the street in two quick scans. Far up, a Legal cop was passing beyond the range of the single dim light. At the other end, a pair of figures skulked along, trying the door of each house they passed. With the cops busy fighting each other, this was better pickings than outside the dome.

Gordon let his eyes turn toward the dimly lighted plastic sheet of the dome above that kept the full citizens safe as the rabble outside could never be. How much longer, he wondered, with guns being used regularly inside? It was a fragile thing, even though erecting it had wrecked the city economy and led to the graft that now ruled. There was always some danger of it cracking, so that houses were still air-tight and regular drills were held for the emergency. Maybe they'd need that experience.

He saw the Legal cop move out of sight and stepped onto the street, trying to look like another petty crook on the prowl. He headed for the nearest alley, which led through the truckyard of Nick the Croop. There was some danger of an ambush there, but small chance

of being picked up by the guarding Legals.

The entrance was in nearly complete darkness. Gordon loosened his knife and tightened his grip on the locust stick. He swung into the alley, moving rapidly and trying to force his eyes to adjust. Once he was past the first few steps, his chances picked up. He felt his scalp tense, but nothing happened, and he moved along more cautiously, skirting garbage and stumbling over a body that had been half stripped.

Suddenly a whisper of sound caught his ears. He stopped, not too quickly, and listened, but everything was still. It *might* have been something falling. But what light there was came from behind him, and he couldn't make out more than the dark walls ahead.

A hundred feet further on, and within twenty yards of the trucks, a swishing rustle reached his ears and light slashed hotly into his eyes. Hands grabbed at his arms, and a club swung down toward his knife. But the warning had been enough. Gordon's arms jerked upwards to avoid the reaching hands His boot lifted, and the flashlight spun aside, broken and dark. With a continuous motion, he switched the knife to his left hand in a thumb-up position and brought it back. There was a grunt of pain, though it obviously hadn't found a vital area. But it gave him the split second he needed. He stepped backwards and twisted. His hands caught the man behind, lifted across a hip, and heaved, just before the front man reached him.

The two ambushers were down in a tangled mess. There was just enough light to make out faint outlines, and Gordon brought his locust club down twice, with the hollow thud of wood on skulls. He groped around behind him until luck guided his hand to the fallen knife. Then he straightened.

His head was swimming in a hot maelstrom of pain, but it was quieting as his breathing returned to normal. And with it was an odd satisfaction at the realization of how far he'd come in this sort of business since his arrival. He'd reached the fine peak where instinct seemed to guide his actions, without the need for thought. As long as his opponents were slower or less ruthless, he could take care of himself.

The trouble, though, was that Trench was neither slow nor squeamish.

Gordon gathered the two hoodlums under his arms and dragged them with him. He

came out in the truckyard and began searching. But Nick the Croop had ridden his reputation long enough to be careless, and the third truck had its key still in the lock. He threw the two into the back and struck a cautious light.

One of them was Jurgens' apelike follower, his stupid face relaxed and vacant. The other was probably also one of Jurgens' growing mob of protection racketeers—the ones who could milk out money from the small shopkeepers when even the police couldn't touch them. He was dressed like it, at least. Gordon yanked out his wallet, but there was no identification; it held only a small sheaf of bills.

For a second, Gordon started to put it back. Then he cursed his own habits. On Mars, the spoils were the victors. And with Sheila draining his income, he could use it. He stripped out the money—and finally put half of it back into the wallet and dropped it beside the hoodlum. Even in jail, a man had to have smokes.

He stuck to the alleys, not using the headlights, after he had locked the two in and started the electric motor. Once he reached the main streets, there would be some all-night traffic, but he didn't want to attract attention out this far. He finally passed an entrance to one of the alleys which showed Legals building some kind of a barricade across the street beyond, and guessed that he was now in Municipal territory. He had no clear idea of how the battles were going, but it looked as if the Seventh Precinct was still in Municipal hands.

Finally, he swung onto a main street and cut on his lights, cruising along at the same speed as the few other trucks. Two Municipal cops were arguing beside a call box, but they paid as little attention to him as they did to the sounds of a group looting a store two blocks down! Gordon grumbled, wondering if they really thought they were soldiers now, instead of cops. Once they let the crooks get out of control . . .

There was no one at the side entrance to Seventh Precinct Headquarters and only two corporals on duty inside; the rest were probably out fighting the Legals, or worrying about it. One of the corporals started to stand up and halt him, but wavered at the sight of the captain's star that was still pinned to his uniform.

"Special prisoners," Gordon told him sharply. "I've got to get information to Trench—and in private!"

The corporal stuttered. Gor-

don knocked him out of the way with his elbow, reached for the door to Trench's private office, and yanked it open. He stepped through, drawing it shut behind him, while his eyes checked the position of his gun at his hip. Then he looked up.

There was no sign of Trench. In his place, and in the uniform of a Municipal captain, sat the heavy figure of Jurgens, the man who had been working busily to take over all the illegal rackets on an efficient basis—and a man who already had Gordon marked down in his book. "Outside!" he snapped. Then his eyes narrowed, and a stiff smile came onto his lips as he laid the pen down. "Oh, it's you, Gordon?"

"Where's Captain Trench?"

The heavy features didn't change as Jurgens chuckled. "Commissioner Trench, Gordon. It seems Arliss decided to get rid of Mayor Wayne, but didn't count on Wayne's spies being better than his. So Trench got promoted—and I got his job for loyal service in helping the force recruit. My boys always wanted to be cops, you know."

Gordon tried to grin in return as he moved closer, slipping the heavy locust club off his wrist. It was like the damned fools to get mixed up in a would-be palace revolution in the middle of their trouble with the Earth-controlled Legals. It was easy enough to fit Jurgens into the pattern, too. But how had Trench managed to swing the promotion over the other captains—unless he'd offered evidence that he might know how to locate the head of the dreaded Solar Security on Mars? . . .

"I sent Ape and Mullins out to get in touch with you," Jurgens said. "But I guess they didn't reach you before you left."

Gordon shook his head slightly, while the nerves bunched and tingled in his neck. "They hadn't arrived when I left the house," he said truthfully enough. There was no point in mentioning that the two out in the truck must be the men he'd met on the way here, in a slight mix-up of identities all around. Or had they been unaware of who he was?

Jurgens reached out for tobacco and filled a pipe. He fumbled in his pockets, as if looking for a light. "Too bad. I knew you weren't in top shape, so I figured a convoy might be handy. Well, no matter. Trench left some instructions about you, and—"

His voice was perfectly normal, but Gordon saw the hand move suddenly toward the drawer that was half-open And

the cigarette lighter was attached to the other side of the desk

The locust stick left Gordon's hand with a snap. It cut through the air a scant eight feet, jerked to a stop against Jurgens' forehead, and clattered onto the top of the desk, while Jurgens folded over, his mouth still open, his hand slumping out of the drawer. The man's chin scraped along the top of the desk, reached the edge, and let his nose and forehead bump faintly before he collapsed completely under the desk. The club rolled toward Gordon, who caught it before it could reach the floor.

But Jurgens was only momentarily out. As Gordon slipped the loop over his wrist again, one of the new captain's hands groped upwards, seeking a button on the edge of the desk.

The two corporals were at the door when Gordon threw it open, but they drew back at the sight of his drawn gun. Feet were pounding below as he found the entrance that led to the truck. He hit the seat and rammed down the throttle with his foot before he could get his hands on the wheel.

It was a full minute before sirens sounded behind him, and Nick the Croop had fast trucks. He spotted the squad car far behind, ducked through a maze of alleys, and lost it for another few precious minutes. Then the barricade lay ahead.

The truck faltered as it hit the nearly-finished obstacle, and Gordon felt his stomach squashing down onto the wheel. He kept his foot to the floor, strewing bits of the barricade behind him, until he was beyond the range of the Legal guns that were firing suddenly. Then he stopped and got out carefully, with his hands up.

"Captain Bruce Gordon, with two prisoners—bodyguards of Captain Jurgens," he reported to the three men in bright new Legal uniforms who were approaching warily. "How do I sign up with you?"

XIII

The Legal forces were short handed and eager for recruits. They had struck quickly according to plans made by experts on Earth, and now controlled about half of Marsport. But it was a sprawling crescent around the central section, harder to handle than the Municipal territory. Gordon was sworn in at once.

Then he cooled his heels while the florid, paunchy ex-politician Commissioner Crane worried about his rating and repeated how corrupt Mars was and how

the collection system was over —absolutely over. In the end, he was given a captain's pay and the rank of sergeant. As a favor, he was allowed to share a beat with Honest Izzy under Captain Hendrix, who had simply switched sides after losing the morning's battle.

Gordon's credits were changed to Legal script, and he was issued a trim-fitting green uniform. Then a surprisingly competent doctor examined his wound, rebandaged it, and sent him home for the day. The change was finished—and he felt like a grown man playing with dolls.

He walked back, watching the dull-looking people closing off their homes, as they had done at elections. Here and there, houses had been broken into during the night. An old man sat in a wrecked doorway, holding an obviously dead girl child in his arms. His eyes followed Gordon without expression. There were occasional buzzes of angry conversation that cut off as he approached.

Marsport had learned to hate all cops, and a change of uniform hadn't altered that; instead, the people seemed to resent the loss of the familiar symbol of hatred.

He came up to a fat, blowsy woman who was firmly planted in his path. "You're a cop!" she accused him. "Okay, cop, you get them thieves outta my place!"

"See your own beat cop," he suggested.

"Says he's busy with some war or other. Can't be bothered!"

Gordon shrugged and followed her to the doorway of a small beer-hall. Inside, the place was a mess, and two ragged men sat at a table drinking, while a sodden wreck that might have been a woman once was sprawled on the floor in drunken stupor. There was a filthy revolver on the table.

"Beat it, copper," the older man said sullenly, and his hand slid for the gun. "The dame usta be my wife, so the joint's half mine. Gotta have some place to stay with you coppers stirring up hell outside, ain't I?"

He watched Gordon advance steadily toward him and licked his lips, fear growing in his eyes. But it was the younger man who grabbed the gun suddenly. Gordon's club swung in a short arc, and the gun clattered to the floor, while the man's scream mixed with the sound of bones breaking in his wrist. He started for the door, and the woman grabbed him and heaved him into the street.

The older man had a knife

out, finally. Gordon knocked it aside with his hand and brought his open palm up against the man's face, rocking him sideways. Then the left palm contacted, tossing him over to meet the right again. Gordon counted calmly, focussing his thoughts on the even count. He stopped at twenty, staring at the slow tears oozing from the bruised face, and swung back to the woman.

The raw animal delight in her eyes was sickening. "Don't lock him up," she half-whispered. "Twenty years, and now I find he's yellow. Leave him here, copper!"

Gordon shrugged. It was probably funny, he thought as he shoved through the small crowd outside. But it wouldn't be funny if every two-bit punk in Marsport figured the police war meant he was free to do what he wanted—or if all the cops were too busy to bother.

He found Izzy and Randolph at the restaurant across from Mother Corey's. Izzy grinned suddenly at the sight of the uniform. "I knew it, gov'nor—knew it the minute I heard Jurgens was a cop. Did you make 'em give you my beat?"

He seemed genuinely pleased as Gordon nodded, and then dropped it, to point to Randolph. "Guess what, gov'nor. The Legals bought Randy's *Crusader*. Traded him an old job press and a bag of scratch for his reputation."

"You'll be late, Izzy," Randolph said quietly. Gordon suddenly realized that Randolph, like everyone else, seemed to be Izzy's friend. He watched the little man leave, and reached out for the menu. Randolph picked it out of his hand. "You've got a wife home, muck-raker. You don't have to eat this filth."

Gordon got up, grimacing at the obvious dismissal. But the publisher motioned him back again.

"Yeah, the Legals want the *Crusader* for their propaganda," he said wearily. "New slogans and new uniforms, and none of them mean anything. Umm. Look, I've been trying to tell you I'm grateful for what you did, sorry I blew my stack—and glad you and the girl are making out. Here!" He drew a small golden band from his little finger. "My mother's wedding ring. Give it to her—and if you tell her it came from me, I'll rip out your guts!"

He got up suddenly and hobbled out, his pinched face working. Gordon turned the ring over, puzzled. Finally he got up and headed for his room, a little surprised to find the door unlocked. Sheila opened her eyes

at his uniform, but made no comment. "Food ready in ten minutes," she told him.

She'd already been shopping, and had installed the tiny cooking equipment used in half of Marsport. There was also a small iron lying beside a pile of his laundered clothes. He dropped onto the bed wearily, then jerked upright as she came over to remove his boots. But there was no mockery on her face—and oddly, it felt good to him. Maybe her idea of married life was different from his.

She was sanding the dishes and putting them away when he finally remembered the ring. He studied it again, then got up and dropped it beside her. He was surprised as she fumbled it on to see that it fitted—and more surprised at the sudden realization that she was entitled to it, and that this wasn't just a game they were using against each other.

She studied it under the glare of the single bulb, and then turned to her room. She was back a few seconds later with a small purse. "I got a duplicate key. Yours is in there," she said thickly. "And—something else. I guess I was going to give it to you anyway. I was afraid someone else might find it—"

He cut her off brusquely, his eyes riveted on the Security badge he'd been sure Trench had taken. "Yeah, I know. Your meal-ticket was in danger. Okay, you've done your nightly duty. Now get the hell out of my room, will you?"

He didn't watch her leave, but he heard the door close several minutes later. With a snort of disgust, he bent down to his bag, located the bottle of cheap whiskey there, and tilted it to his lips. It was time he got drunk—stinko enough to wash out the shock of the badge in her purse, and the stupidity he'd made of his whole damned life on Mars.

Play it smart, be ruthless, look out for number one! The original Kukla, only with less free-will than a ventriloquist's dummy. The man who could almost save himself from a danger that didn't exist. If he'd stayed put, Jurgen's punks would have convoyed him back to a set-up where Trench was Commissioner and Gordon might have been his right-hand man, as Jurgens had probably been trying to tell him. And when the silly war was over, he'd have had the money to stow away back to Earth, hire the best plastic surgeon, and set himself up on easy street.

Instead, he'd gone over to the other side without any choice in the matter. He'd thrown a seven with his own sevens dice!

Trench was probably busy right now, planning when the exact worst time would be to tip the Earth forces off to his phoney evidence that Gordon had killed the Earth cop and Solar Security ace Whaler! It might take a week or two, just to give him time to squirm. And even without that, the graft was gone, taking with it his last chance to go back to Earth. Sure, he'd joined the Earth forces—but so had a lot of others, and it wouldn't make them revoke his yellow ticket!

Security was probably sour on him, anyway, or they'd have gotten in touch with him. They were through with him, and he'd either go to Mercury, or wind up fifty years from now out there in the slums, scavenging. He tilted the bottle up, downing the rest as fast as his throat would handle it. It had finally begun to hit him, and he debated throwing Sheila out. There was something wrong with that idea. Then it occurred to him that when he had to hide out beyond the dome, he'd just put her to work, make her his meal-ticket. Big joke! Have to hang onto her. Be nice to Cuddles . . .

He staggered across the room, but it was too far, and the bare floor looked too soft. He had a single final thought, though, before he passed out While he lasted, he'd be the best damned cop this planet of his ever saw!

Somehow he was in bed and it was morning again when Sheila woke him. He'd slept past his hangover, and he ate the breakfast she had ready, split the money he had with her, and went out to join Izzy.

The week went on mechanically, while he gradually adjusted to the new angles of being a Legal. The banks were open, and deposits honored, as promised. But it was in the printing press script of Legal currency, useful only through Mayor Gannett's trick Exchanges. All orders had to be place and paid for at the nearest Exchange if the total came to more than five credits, and the Exchange then purchased and had them delivered. Water went up from fourteen credits to eighty credits for a gallon of pure distilled. Other things were worse. Resentment flared up, but the script was the only money available, and as long as it had any value it still bound the people to the new regime.

Supplies were scarce, salt and sugar almost unavailable. Earth had cut off all shipping until the affair was settled, and nobody in the outlands would deal in script

He came home the third eve-

ning to find that Sheila had managed to find space for her bunk in his room, cut off by a heavy screen, and had closed the other room to save the rent. It led to some relaxation between them, and they began talking impersonally.

Gordon watched for a sign that Trench had passed on his evidence of the murder of Whaler, but there was no sign. Most of the time, the pressure of the beat took his mind from it. Looting had stepped up, and between trying to keep order and the constant series of minor fracases with Municipal men at the borders, he began to acquire a shield of fatigue that nothing could cut.

Izzy had cooperated reluctantly at first, until Gordon was able to convince him that in the long run it was the people who paid his salary. Then he nodded. "It's a helluva roundabout way of doing things, gov'nor, but if the gees pay for protection any bloody way, then they're gonna get it!"

They got it. Hoodlums began moving elsewhere toward easier pickings. The shops now opened promptly as Gordon and Izzy came on duty, and they could time the end of their beat by the sudden emptying of the streets. People spoke to them now, and once, when a small gang decided to wipe out the nuisance of the two, men from the surrounding houses came pouring out to join in and turn it into a decisive victory.

Hendrix took time out for a pompous lecture on loyalty to the government first, but couldn't find any proof that they had weakened the Legal position, and finally disregarded it, except to warn them that the limited jail facilities had to be reserved for captured Municipals who wouldn't switch sides. The two henchmen of Jurgens had already been released.

Gordon turned his entire pay over to Sheila; at current prices, it would barely keep them in food for a week. He could get lunch and cigarettes along his beat from people eager to offer them. But if inflation kept on, his salary would mean nothing. "I told you I was a punched meal ticket," he said bitterly.

"We'll live," she answered him. "I got a job today—barmaid, on your beat, where being your wife helps."

He could think of nothing to say to it, but after supper he went to Izzy's room to arrange for a raid on Municipal territory. Such small raids were nominally on the excuse of extending the boundaries, but actually matters of out-and-out looting. It was tough on the

people near the border, but no worse than the constantly increasing gang fights.

The people endured it, somehow. On Mars, they couldn't simply pack and move on; the planet gave them life, but only of a marginal sort. And they had been conditioned to a hopeless acceptance of corruption and abuse that no Earth citizen could ever understand.

He came back to find her cleaning up, and shoved her away. "Go to bed. You look beat. I'll sand these."

She started to protest, then let him take over. It occured to him that there was no need for her to stay, now. But their life was getting to be a habit, with even the bitterness a bond between them. And with conditions as they were, there was more financial safety in pooling their incomes.

Maybe some day, with the Earth forces probably winning, things would be better. Marsport was the only place on the planet under Earth charter, but as the funnel for all trade it was valuable enough to justify rebuilding into what it could have been.

They never made the looting raid. The next morning, they arrived at the Precinct house to find men milling around the bulletin board, buzzing over an announcement there. Apparently, Chief Justice Arnold had broken with the Wayne administration, and the mimeographed form was a legal ruling that Wayne was no longer Mayor, since the charter had been voided. He was charged with inciting a riot, and a warrant had been issued for his arrest.

Hendrix appeared finally. "All right, men," he shouted. "You all see it. We're going to arrest Wayne. By jingo, they can't say we ain't legal now! Every odd-numbered shield goes from every precinct. Gordon, Isaacs—you two been talking big about law and order. Here's the warrant. You two take it and arrest Wayne! And by jimminy, shoot if you gotta! It's all legal now."

It took nearly an hour of pep talks and working themselves up to get the plans settled, and the men weren't too happy then. There was no profit to such a raid, and it had entirely too warlike a feeling. But finally they headed for the trucks that had been arriving. Most of them belonged to Nick the Croop, who had apparently decided the Legals would win.

Gordon and Izzy found the lead truck and led the way. The little man was busy testing his knives as they rolled. "Honest Izzy, that's me. Give me a job

and I do it. Only remind me to see a crazy-doctor, gov'nor."

They neared the bar where Sheila was working, and Gordon swore. She was running toward the center of the street, frantically trying to flag him down, and he barely managed to swerve around her. "Damned fool!" he muttered.

Izzy's pock-marked face soured for a second as he stared at Gordon. "The princess? She sure is," he said flatly.

The crew at the barricade had been alerted, and now began clearing it aside hastily, while others kept up a covering fire against the few Municipals. The trucks wheeled through, and Gordon dropped back to let scout trucks go ahead and pick off any rash enough to head for the call boxes. They couldn't prevent advance warning, but they could delay and minimize it. Hendrix or Crane had done a good job of organizing.

They were near the big Municipal Building when they came to the first real opposition, and it was obviously hastily assembled. The scouts took care of most of the trouble, though a few shots pinged against the truck Gordon was driving.

"Rifles!" Izzy commented in disgust. "They'll ruin the dome yet. Why can't they stick to knives?"

He was studying a map of the big building, picking their best entrance. Ahead, trucks formed a sort of V formation as they reached the grounds around it and began bulling their way through the groups that were trying to organize a defense. Gordon found his way cleared and shot through, emerging behind the defense and driving at full speed toward the entrance Izzy pointed out.

"Cut speed! Left sharp!" Izzy shouted. "Now, in there!"

They sliced into a small tunnel, scraping their sides where it was barely big enough for the truck. Then they reached a dead end, with just room for them to squeeze through the door of the truck and into an entrance marked with a big notice of privacy.

There was a guard beside an elevator, but Izzy's knife took care of him. They ducked around the elevator, unsure of whether it could be remotely controlled, and up a narrow flight of stairs, down a hallway, and up another flight. A Municipal corporal at the top grabbed for a warning whistle, but Gordon clipped him with a hasty rabbit-punch and shoved him down the stairs. Then they were in front of an ornate door, with their weapons ready.

Izzy yanked the door open and

dropped flat behind it. Bullets from a submachine gun clipped out, peppering the entrance and the door, ricocheting down the hall. The yammering stopped, finally, and Izzy stuck his head and one arm out with a snap of his knife. Gordon leaped in, to see a Municipal dropping the machine gun and strangling around the knife in his throat.

There were about thirty cops inside, gathered around the Mayor, with Trench standing at one side. Izzy's arm was flicking steadily, unloading his knives, and Gordon was busy picking off the men in the order in which they tried to draw their guns. The fools had obviously expected the machine gun to do all the work.

Izzy leaped for the machine gun and yanked it from the dead hands, while the cops slowly began raising their arms. Wayne sat petrified, staring unbelievingly, and Gordon drew out the warrant. "Wayne, you're under arrest!"

Trench moved forward, his hands in the air, but with no mark of surprise or fear on his face. "So the bad pennies turn up. You damned fools, you should have stuck. I had big plans for you, Gordon. I've still got them, if you don't insist . . ."

His hands whipped down savagely toward his hips and came up sharply! Gordon spun, and the gun leaped in his hands, while the submachine gun jerked forward and clicked on an empty chamber. Trench was tumbling forward to avoid the shot, but he twitched as a bullet creased his shoulder. Then he was upright, waving empty hands at them, with the thin smile on his face deepening. He'd had no guns—it had been a pure bluff, and it had worked.

Gordon jerked around, but Wayne was already disappearing through a heavy door. And the cops were reaching for their guns again. Gordon estimated the chances of escape instantly, and then leaped forward into their group, with Izzy at his side, seeking close quarters where guns wouldn't work.

Gun butts, elbows, fists and clubs were pounding at him, while his own club lashed out savagely. In ten seconds, things began to haze over, but his arms went on mechanically, seeking the most damage they could work. It almost seemed that they could win through to the shelter of the door beyond.

Then a heavy bellow sounded, and a seeming mountain of flesh thundered across the huge room. There was no shuffle to Mother Corey now. The huge legs pumped steadily, and the great arms were reaching out to knock

aside clubs and knives. Men began spewing out of the brawl like straw from a threasher as the old man grabbed arms, legs or whatever was handy. He had one cop in his left arm, using him a a flail against the others, and seemed to be completely unaware of danger to himself.

The Municipals broke. And at the first sign, Mother Corey leaped forward, dropping his flail and gathering Izzy and Gordon under his arms. He hit the heavy door with his shoulder and crashed through without breaking stride. Stairs lay there, and he took them three at a time.

He dropped them finally as they came to a side entrance. There was a sporadic firing going on there, and a knot of Municipals were clustered around a few Legals, busy with knives and clubs. Corey broke into a run again, driving straight into them and through, with Gordon and Izzy on his heels. The surprise element was enough to give them a few seconds, before hasty, ill-aimed bullets snapped after them.

Then they were around a small side-building, out of danger. Sheila was holding the door of a large three-wheeler open, and yelling for them to hurry. They ducked into it, while she grabbed the wheel.

They edged forward until they could make out the shape of the fight going on. The Legals had never quite reached the front of the building, obviously, and were now cut into sections. Corey tapped her shoulder, pointing out the route, and she gunned the car.

They were through too fast to draw fire from the busy groups of battle-crazed men, leaping across the square and into the first side street they could find. Then she slowed, and headed for the main street back to Legal territory.

"Lucky we found a good car to steal," Mother Corey wheezed. He was puffing now, mopping rivulets of perspiration from his face. "I'm getting old, cobbers. Once I broke every strongman record on Earth—still stand, too—before it went to my head. But not now. Senile!"

"You didn' have to come," Izzy said, but there was a grin on his battered face.

"When my own granddaughter comes crying for help? When she finally breaks down and admits she needs her old grandfather?"

Gordon was staring back at the straggling of trucks he could see beginning to break away. The raid was over, and the Legals had lost. Trench had tricked him, and life under

Hendrix was going to be rough from now on.

Izzy grunted suddenly. "Gov'nor, if you're right and the plain gees pay my salary, who's paying me to start fighting other cops? Or is it maybe that somebody isn't being exactly honest with the scratch they lift from the gees?"

"We still have to eat," Gordon said bitterly. "And to eat, we'll go on doing what we're told."

It was all life meant now—a bare existence. And in his case, even that was uncertain.

XIV

Hendrix had been wounded lightly, and was out when Gordon and Izzy reported. But the next day, they were switched to a new beat where trouble had been thickest and given twelve-hour duty — without special overtime.

Izzy considered it slowly and shook his head. "That does it, gov'nor. It ain't honest, treating us this way. It just proves what I've been thinking. If the crackle comes from the people and these gees give everybody a dome cracking, then they're crooks. And who's letting 'em get away with it? We are, gov'nor. But not me; it ain't honest, and I'm too sick to work. And if that bloody doctor won't agree . . ."

He turned toward the dispensary. Gordon hesitated, and then swung off woodenly to take up his new beat. At least, it still made living possible; and perhaps, if he did his best, when it was all over Security would let him stay here. Earth seemed impossible now, but he might duck the threatened mines of Mercury.

He plunged into the work on his new beat, trying to numb himself by exhaustion. Apparently, his reputation had gone ahead of him, since most of the hoodlums had decided pickings would be easier on some beat where the cops had their own secret rackets to attend to, instead of head busting. They probably expected Izzy to show up later. Once they learned he was alone . . .

But the second day, two of the citizens fell into step behind him almost at once, armed with heavy clubs. Periodically during the shift, replacements took their place, making sure that he was never by himself. It surprised him even more when he saw that a couple of the men had come over from his old beat. Something began to burn inside him, but he held himself in, confining his talk to vague comments on the rumors going around.

There were enough of them,

mostly based on truth. The Croopsters were busy with a three-day gang war with the Planters, and the cops on both sides were doing nothing about it, though seventy bystanders had been killed. Part of Jurgens' old crowd had broken away from him and established a corner on most of the drugs available; they had secretly traded a supply to Wayne, who had become an addict, for a stock of weapons.

Gordon remembered the contraband shipment of guns, and compared it to the increase he'd noticed in weapons, and to the impossible prices the pushers were demanding. It made sense.

All kind of supplies were low, and the outlands beyond Marsport had cut off all shipments. Script was useless to them, and the Legals were raiding all cargoes destined for Wayne's section. And the Municipals had imposed new taxes again.

Gordon bolstered himself with the thought that it couldn't go on forever, and that the Legals seemed to be winning slowly. Once the war was over and the charter officially turned over to Security, it would have to act. Things were at their worst now, and later . . .

He came back from what should have been his day off to find Izzy in uniform, waiting grimly. Behind the screen, there was a rustling of clothes, and a dress came sailing from behind it. While he stared, Sheila came out, finishing the zipping of her airsuit. She moved to a small bag and began drawing out the gun she had used and a knife. He caught her shoulders and shoved her back, pulling the weapons from her.

"Get out of my way, you damned Legal machine!" she spat at him. "Do you think I never knew where you got the ring? Do you think I can go on forever with no feelings at all? All right, I've been your obedient servant—and no thanks from you! Now you can take it and stuff it . . ."

"Easy, princess," Izzy said. "He hasn't seen it yet, I guess. Here, gov'nor!"

He picked up a copy of Randolph's new little *Truth* and pointed to the headline. Gordon read it, and blinked. It glared up at him in forty-eight point ultra-bold:

SECURITY DENOUNCES RAPE OF MARSPORT!

The story was somewhat cooler than that, but not much. Randolph simply quoted what was supposed to be an official cable from Security on Earth, denouncing both governments, and demanding both immediately surrender. It listed the crimes of Wayne, and then tore into the

Legals as a bunch of dupes, sent by North America to foment trouble while they looted the city, and to give the Earth government an excuse for seizing military control of Marsport officially. Citizens were instructed not to cooperate, and all members of either government were indicted for high treason to Security!

He crushed the paper slowly, tearing it to bits with his clenched hands, and seeing in each bit a yellow ticket to Mercury. He'd swallowed the implication that the *Legals* were Security, or from it. He'd been suckered in . . .

Then it hit him slowly, and he looked up. "Where's Randolph?"

"At his plant. At least he left for it, according to Sheila."

Gordon picked up Sheila's gun and buckled it on beside his own. She grabbed at it, but he shoved her back again. "You're staying here, Cuddles." He grimaced as she spat at him, and a touch of the almost forgotten amusement twisted his lips. "You're supposed to be a woman now, remember!"

She was swearing hotly as they left, but made no attempt to follow. Gordon broke into a slow trot behind Izzy, until they could spot one of the remaining cabs. He stopped it with his whistle, and dumped the passenger out unceremoniously, while Izzy gave the address. There was a stream of protest from the driver, but it cut off at the sudden appearance of the knife in Izzy's hand.

"The damned fool opened up on the border—figured he'd circulate to both sections," Izzy said. "We'd better get out a block up and walk. And I hope we ain't *too* bloody late!"

The building was a wreck, outside; inside it was worse. Gordon ripped open the door to the sound of metal crashing. Men in the Municipal uniform were working over the small job press and dumping the handset type from the boxes. On the floor, a Legal cop lay under the wreckage, apparently having gotten there first and been taken care of by the later Municipals. Randolph had been sitting in a chair between two of the cops, but now he leaped up with a cry at the new interruption and tried to flee through the back door.

Izzy started forward, but Gordon pulled him back, as the cops reached for weapons. There was no use brawling here when the others had been caught flat-footed. The gun in his hand picked them out at quarters too close for a miss, starting with the cop who had jumped to catch Randolph. Izzy had ducked

around the side, and now came back, leading the little man.

Randolph paid no attention to the dead men, nor to the bruises on his own body. He moved forward to the press, staring at it, and there were tears in his eyes as he ran his hands over the broken metal. Then he looked up at them. "Arrest or rescue?" he asked.

"Arrest!" a voice from the door said harshly, and Gordon swung to see six Legals filing in, headed by Hendrix himself. The captain nodded at Gordon. "Good work, sergeant. By jinx, when I heard the Municipals were coming, I got scared they'd get him for sure. Crane wants to watch this guy shot in person! Come on, you damned little traitor!"

He grabbed Randolph by the arm, twisting it sadistically, and grinning at the scream the torture produced.

"You're overlooking something, Hendrix," Gordon cut in. He had moved back toward the wall, to face the group. "If you ever look at my record, you'll find I'm an ex-newspaperman myself. This is a rescue. Tie them up, Izzy."

Hendrix was faster than Gordon had thought. He had his gun almost up before Gordon could fire. A bluish hole appeared on the man's forehead, and one thick hand reached for it, while surprise ran briefly over the features. He dropped slowly, the back of his head a gory mess. Randolph bent over, throwing up over the broken metal on the floor, and the other Legals looked almost as sick. But they made no trouble as Izzy bound them with baling wire.

"And I hope nobody finds them," he commented. "All right, Randy, I guess we're a bunch of refugees heading for the outside, and bloody lucky at that. Proves a man shouldn't have friends."

Randolph's face was still greenish white, but he straightened and managed a feeble smile. "Not to me, Izzy. Right now I can appreciate friends. But you two better get going. I've got some unfinished business to tend to." He moved to one corner and began dragging out an old double-cylinder mimeograph. "Either of you know where I can buy stencils and ink and find some kind of a truck to haul this paper along?"

Izzy stopped and stared at the rabbity, pale little man. Then he let out a sudden yelp of laughter. "Okay, Randy, we'll find them. Gov'nor, you'd better tell my mother I'll be using the old sheets. Go on. You've got the princess to worry about.

We will be along later."

He grabbed Randolph's hand and ducked out the back before Gordon could protest. The other hesitated, and then moved toward the other exit. There would be little chance of catching another cab, but that didn't much matter now. He found a small car finally, kicked the glass out, and shorted the switch hastily.

Izzy could only have meant that they were going to hole up in Mother Corey's old Chicken Coop. He'd managed to make a full circle, back to the beginnings on Mars. But then he'd been only a yellow-ticket firster. Now he was branded as a traitor by Security, a deserter and would-be assassin by the Municipals, and a criminal on too many counts to list by the Legals. And even in the outlands he had a reputation—the iron cop, without a heart. He'd started with a deck of cards, and now he was going back with a club. He wondered if one would be better than the other.

He had counted on at least some regret from Mother Corey, however. But the old man only nodded after hearing that Randolph was safe. "Fanatics, crusaders and damned fools!" he said. He shook his head sadly and went shuffling back to his room, where two of his part-time henchmen were sitting.

Sheila had been sitting on the bunk, still in her airsuit. Now she jerked upright, and then sank back with a slow flush. Her hands were trembling as she reached out for a cup of coffee and handed it to him, listening to his quick report of Randolph's safety and the fact that he was going back outside the dome.

"I'm all packed," she said. "And I packed your things, too."

He shot his eyes around the room, realizing that it was practically bare except for a few of her dresses. She followed his gaze, and shook her head. "I won't need them out there," she said. Her voice caught on that, but she covered quickly. "They'll be safe here."

"So will you, now that you've made up with the Mother," he told her. "Your mealticket's ruined, Cuddles. And you made it clear a little while ago just where you stand. Remind me to tell you sometime how much fun it's been. Makes me think marriage is a good idea. I'll have to try it sometime."

She bit her lips and struggled with herself. Then she grinned with her lips, bitterly. Her voice was low and almost expressionless. "Your mother was good with a soldering iron, wasn't she? You even look human." She

bent to pick up a shoulder pack and a bag, and her face was normal when she stood up again. "You might guess that the cops would be happy to get ahold of your wife now, though. Come on, it's a long walk."

He hesitated for a moment, and then picked up the rest of the luggage, surprised at how much they had managed to accumulate, light though it was. Corey could have protected her, he thought; but he let it go, and moved out of the room quietly. Somehow, it hurt to leave, though he couldn't figure why—nor why something in his head insisted he'd expected it to hurt more.

Mother Corey wasn't around, and that did hurt. He shrugged it off and led Sheila to the car he had stolen. Without a pass, he couldn't take it through the locks, but it would be useful until then. Without thinking, he swung through his beat. His lights picked out a small group of teen-age punks working on the window of a small shop, and his hand groped automatically for his gun. Then he sighed and drove on. It wasn't his job now, and he couldn't risk trouble.

He left the car beyond the gate, and they pushed through the locker room toward the smaller exit, stopping to fasten down their helmets. The guard halted them, but without any suspicion.

"Going hunting for those damned kids, eh?" he said. He stared at Sheila, deliberately smacking his lips. "Lucky devil! All I got for a guide was an old bum. Okay, luck, sergeant!"

It made no sense to Gordon, but he wasn't going to argue over it. They went through and out into the waste and slums beyond the domes, heading out until there were only the few phosphor bulbs to guide their way. It was as if they were in a separate world, where squalor was a meaningless term. Even in the darkness, there was a feeling that came across to them.

Gordon was moving cautiously, using his helmet light only occasionally, with his gun ready in his hand. But it was Sheila who caught the faint sound. He heard her cry out and turned to see her crash into the stomach of a man with a half-raised stick. He went down with almost no resistance. Sheila shot the beam of her light on the thin, drawn face. "Rusty!"

"Hi, princess." He got up slowly, trying to grin. "Didn't know who it was. Sorry. Ever get that louse you were out for?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I got him. That's him — my husband! What's wrong with you, Rusty?

You've lost fifty pounds, and . . ."

"Things are a mite tough out here, princess. No deliveries. Closed my bar, been living sort of hand to mouth, but not much mouth." His eyes bulged greedily as she dug into a bag and began to drag out the sandwiches she must have packed for the trip. But he shook his head. "I ain't so bad off. I ate something yesterday. But if you can spare something for the kid—Hey, kid!"

A thin boy of about sixteen crept out of the cover of some rubble, staring uncertainly. Then at the sight of the food, he made a lunge, grabbed it, and hardly waited to get it through the slits of his suit before gulping it down. Rusty sat down, his lined old face breaking into a faint grin. He hesitated, but finally took some of the food.

"Shouldn't oughta. You'll need it. Umm." He swallowed slowly, as if tasting the food all the way down. "Kid can't talk. Cop caught his peddling one of Randolph's phamphlets, cut out part of his tongue. But he's all right now. Come on, kid, hurry it up. We gotta convoy these people."

They went on finally, with Gordon turning it over in his head. He hadn't completely believed the stories he had heard about life out here; unconsciously, he'd figured it in terms of previous experience. But with the bank failure, most of the workers had been fired. And the war inside the dome must have cut people off completely.

They were following a kind of road when headlights bore down on them. Gordon's hand was on his gun as they leaped for shelter, but there was no hostile move from the big truck. He studied it, trying to decide what a truck would be doing here. Then a Marspeaker-amplified voice shouted from it. "Any muck-rakers there?"

"One," Gordon shouted back, and ran toward it, motioning the others to follow. He'd always objected to the nickname, but it made a good code. Randolph's frail hand came down to help them up, but a bigger paw did the actual lifting.

"Why didn't you two wait?" Mother Corey asked, his voice booming out of his Marspeaker. "I figured Izzy'd stop by first. Here, sit over there. Not much room, with my stuff and Randolph's, but it beats walking."

"What in hell brings you back?" Gordon asked.

The huge man shrugged ponderously. "A man gets tired of being respectable, cobber. And I'm getting old and senti-

mental about the Chicken Coop." He chuckled, rubbing his hands together. "But not so old I can't handle a couple of guards that are stubborn about trucks, eh, Izzy?"

"Messy, but nice," Izzy agreed from the pile above them. "Tell those trained apes of yours to cut the lights, will you, Mother? Somebody must be using the Coop."

They stopped the truck before reaching the old wreck. In the few dim lights, the old building still gave off an air of mold and decay. Gordon had a sudden picture of an ancient, evil old crone chuckling over her past, with a few coarse gray hairs sticking out from under a henna-red wig. But the Chicken Coop had memories no single crone could have contained within her mind. He shuddered faintly, then followed Izzy and the Mother into the semi-secret entrance.

Izzy went ahead, almost silent, with a thin strand of wire between his hands, his elbows weaving back and forth slowly to guide him. He was apparently as familiar with the garrotte as the knife, and this would be faster. But they found no guard. Izzy pressed the seal release and slid in cautiously, while the others followed.

There were no guards, but in the beam of Gordon's torch, a single figure lay sprawled out on the floor half-way to the rickety stairs to the main house. Mother Corey grunted, and moved quickly to the coughing, battered old air machine. His fingers closed a valve equipped with a combination lock, and he shook his head heavily.

"They're all dead, cobbers," he wheezed. "Dead because a crook had to try his hand on a lock. Years ago I had a flask of poison gas attached, in case a gang should ever squeeze me out. A handy thing to have."

In the filthy rooms above, Gordon found the corpses—about fifteen of them, and some obviously formerly of the Jurgens organization. They had been dead for long enough to have grown cold, at least, apparently dying without realizing they were in danger. He found the ape-like bodyguard stretched out on a bunk, still staring at a book of low-grade pornography, a vacant smile on his face.

A yell from the basement called him back down to where Izzy was busily going through piles of crates and boxes stacked along one wall. He was pointing to a lead-foil covered box. "Dope! And all that other stuff's ammunition! You know what, gov'nor? All that scuttlebutt

about the gang cornering the dope supply and dealing with Wayne must've been on the level! And now we got it!"

He shivered, staring at the fortune in his hands. Then he grimaced and shoved the open can back in its case. He threw it back and began stacking ammunition cases in front of the dope. Gordon went out to get the others and start moving in the supplies and transferring the corpses to the truck for disposal. Randolph scurried off to start setting up his makeshift plant in the basement.

Mother Corey was staring about the filthy, decrepit interior when they returned. His putty-like skin was creased into wrinkles of horrified disgust, and his wheezing voice was almost sobbing. "Filthy," he wailed. "A pig-pen. They've ruined the Coop, cobber. Smell that air —even I can smell it! He sniffed dolefully. It was pretty bad, Gordon had to agree. Nothing would ever remove the rank, sour staleness. But it looked a good deal better to his eyes than it had been before the gang took it over.

Mother Corey sighed again. "Well, it'll give the boys something to do," he decided. "When a man gets old, he likes a little comfort, cobber. Nice things around him. . . ."

Gordon found what had been his old room and dumped his few things into it. Sheila watched him uncertainly, and then took possession of the next room. She came back a few minutes later, staring at the ages-old filth. "I'll be cleaning for a week," she said. "What are you going to do now, Bruce?"

He shook his head, and started back down the stairs. It was an unanswerable question. Originally, he'd intended to set up the Coop and run it as Mother Corey had done; but now the Mother would be attending to that. And it hadn't been too good an idea, anyhow. He ran over his occupations bitterly in his mind. Gambler, fighter, cop —he'd tried in one way or another everything except reporting, and failed at each.

For a second, he hesitated. Then he hurried, past the first landing, and down into the basement where Randolph was arranging his mimeograph.

The printer listened to only the first sentence, and shook his head impatiently. "I was afraid you'd think of that, Gordon. Look, I'm grateful for what you've done—but not that grateful. You never were a reporter —you ran a column. You slanted, sensationalized, shouted, and hunted publicity for yourself.

I've read the stuff you wrote. You killed and maimed with words. You're good at fighting, killing and maiming—and at finding good excuses for it, maybe. You can write up what every man here feels, and make him nod his head and swear you're dead right. But you never dug up news that would help people, or tell them what they didn't suspect all along. And that's what I've got to have."

"Thanks!" Gordon said curtly. "Too bad Security didn't think I was as lousy a reporter as you do!"

Randolph shrugged. He dropped to the chair, pulled the battered portable to him, and became extremely busy, writing about a quick brown fox that jumped over a lazy dog. Then he dropped his hands and swung back. "Okay. I'll give you a job, for one week. Get off your self-pity and get out there where people have something to be self-pitying about. See what outer Marsport is like. Find what can be done, if anything, and do it if you can. Then come back and give me six columns on it. I'll pay Mother Corey for your food—and for your wife's—and if I can find one column's worth of news in it, maybe I'll give you a second week. I can't afford it—I won't get a cent for what I publish now, and I'll have to pay newsboys—but I'll do it. I can't see a man's wife starve because he doesn't know how to make an honest living!"

Gordon felt his arm jerk back, and the knotted fist started up at the pinched, nervous little face in front of him. But at the last second, he killed the punch, feeling his muscles wrench from the effort. Finger by finger, he unclenched his hand and dropped to his side, while the anger dulled and became only a bruise. "I'll think about it," he said finally.

But Randolph was jumping the quick fox over the lazy dog again.

Rusty and one of Mother Corey's men were on guard, and the others had turned in. Gordon went up the stairs, breathing the rancid, musty odor and watching the rotten boards below him. As a kid in the slums, it had been the smell of cabbage and soaking diapers, and he had watched rats fighting over garbage, while men made pious speeches of horror over the tenements, as they had done for five hundred years.

He threw himself onto the bed in disgust. He'd fought his way out of those slums. He'd fought the petty crooks, the cops who lived on them, and the whole blasted set-up that made such misery possible. He'd

fought his way to a filthy bed in a hovel where no rat could live, already asking for charity on the long way to the ultimate bottom, without a genuine friend to his name. Sure, he was good at fighting!

"Bruce!" Sheila stood outlined in the doorway against the dim glow of a phosphor bulb. Her robe was partly open, and an animal hunger in him burned along his arms and tautened the muscles of his abdomen. Then, before he could lift himself, she bent over and began unfastening his boots. "You all right, Bruce? I heard you tossing around."

"I'm fine," he told her mechanically. "Just making plans for tomorrow."

He watched her turn back slowly, then lay quietly, trying not to disturb her again. Tomorrow, he thought. Tomorrow he'd find some kind of an answer; and it wouldn't be Randolph's charity.

XV

There were three men, each with a white circle painted on chest and left arm, talking to Mother Corey when Gordon came down the rickety steps. He stopped for a second, but there was no sign of trouble. Then the words of the thin man below reached him.

"So we figured when we found the stiffs maybe you'd come back, Mother. Damn good thing we were right. We can sure use that ammunition you found. Now, where's this Gordon fellow?"

"Here!" Gordon told the man. He'd recognized him finally as Schulberg, the little grocer from the Nineteenth Precinct.

The man swung suspiciously, then grinned weakly. There was hunger and strain on his face, but an odd authority and pride now. "I'll be doggoned. Whyn't you say he was with Whaler, Mother?"

"They want someone to locate Ed Aimsworth and see about getting some food shipped in from outside, cobber," Mother Corey told him. "They got some money scraped together, but the hicks are doing no business with Marsport. You know Ed—just tell him I sent you. I'd go myself, but I'm getting too old to go chasing men out there."

"What's in it?" Gordon asked, but he was already reaching for his helmet. Almost anything would be better than Randolph's charity.

There was a surprised exchange of glances from the others, but Mother Corey chuckled. "Heart like a steel trap, cobbers," he said, almost approvingly. "Well, you'll be

earning your keep here—yours and that granddaughter's, too. Here, you'll need directions for finding Aimsworth."

He handed the paper with his scrawled notes on it over to Gordon and went shuffling back. Gordon shrugged and stuck it into his pouch, turning to follow the three men through the seal. Outside, they had a truck waiting, and Rusty and Corey's two henchmen were busy loading it with ammunition from the cellar.

Schulberg motioned him into the cab of the truck, and the other two climbed into the closed rear section. "All right," Gordon asked. "What goes on?"

The other shrugged, and began explaining between jolts as he picked a way through the ruin and rubble. Whaler had done better than Gordon had expected; he'd laid out a program for a citizen's vigilante committee to police their own area, and had drilled enough in the ruthless use of the club to keep the gangs down. Once the police were all busy inside the dome with their private war, the committee had been the only means of keeping order in the whole territory beyond, and was now extended to cover about half of the area as a voluntary police organization. For a time, the leanness of pickings out here had made the job easier by driving most of the gangs into coalition with others inside the dome. But now . . .

He pointed outside. It was changed, Gordon saw. There were less people outside. And where belligerance and sullen hate had been the keynotes along with hopelessness before, now there was the mark of desperation that marked those who had finally given up completely. The few kids on the filthy streets simply sat staring with hungry eyes, while their parents moved about sluggishly without any apparent destination. Gordon had never seen group starvation before, but the ultimate ugliness of it in the gaunt faces and bloated stomachs was unmistakable.

They passed a crowd around a crude gallows, and Schulberg stopped. A man was already dead and dangling. But the fire of mob savagery was cooled to a dull hatred in the eyes watching him. "Should turn 'em ever to us cops," Schulberg said. "What's he hung for?"

"Hoarding," a voice answered, and others supplied the few details. The dead man had been caught with a half bag of flour and part of a case of beans. Schulberg nodded slowly, staring at the corpse with contempt. He found a scrap of something

and pencilled the crime on it, together with a circle signature and pinned it to the dangling body.

"All food should be turned in," he explained to Gordon as they climbed back into the truck. "We figure community kitchens can stretch things a bit more. And we give a half extra ration to the guys who can find anything useful to do."

The bank failure had apparently thrown nearly everyone out here out of jobs, since there had been no appreciable capital left to meet payrolls. And the police war had ended work at the few places that had been open, since it was unsafe to leave the dome before the volunteers gained some measure of order.

They passed another hanging corpse with a sign that proclaimed him to be a ghoul. Schulberg shrugged. "Sure, cannibalism. What can you expect. Turned up a woman yesterday.

Husband missing, kids looking well fed. But she proved the guy killed himself for the kids. And she hadn't touched it herself. So we hadda let her go. Sometimes, when I see my own kids . . . Oh, hell—we got enough so most people won't starve to death for another week, I guess. But you'd better get Aimsworth to send something, Gordon. Here, here's the scratch we scraped up."

He passed over a bag filled with a collection of small bills and coins. It was heavy, but that was due to the smallness of the credit pieces, rather than to the total sum. "We can trust you, I guess," he said dully. "Remember you with Whaler, anyhow. And you can tell Aimsworth we got plenty of men looking for work, in case he can use 'em."

He pulled up to shout a report through the big Marspeaker as they passed the old building Whaler had used as a precinct house. It now had a crude sign proclaiming it voluntary police HQ and outland government center. Then he went on until they came to a spur of the little electric monorail system, with three abandoned service engines parked at the end.

"Extra air inside, and the best we could do for food. Was gonna try myself, but I don't know Aimsworth," Schulberg said. He handed over a key, and nodded toward the first service engine. "Good luck, Gordon—and damn it, we're—we gotta eat, don't we? You tell him that! It ain't much—but get what you can!"

He swung the truck, and was gone before Gordon could reach the engine, leaving behind only a memory of hungry, desperate eyes. Gordon climbed into the

enclosed cab, wondering why he'd let himself be talked into this. But his hand was already pulling back questioningly on the only lever he could see. The engine backed briefly, until he reversed the control. Then it moved forward, picking up speed. Apparently there was still power flowing in from the automatic atomic generators.

He got off to puzzle out a switch, using Mother Corey's scrawled instructions. It was a good thing there was only a simple rail system here.

He had vaguely expected to see more of Mars, but for eight hours and nearly four hundred miles there was only the bareness, flatness and dunes of unending sandy surface and scraggly, useless native plants, opened out to the sun. Marsport had been located where the only vein of uranium had been found on Mars, and the growing section was closer to the equator.

Then he came to villages. Again there was the sight of children running around without helmets—kids running and playing, he noticed, remembering the apathetic huddles that were kids back in outer Marsport. He stopped once for directions, and a man stared at him suspiciously and finally threw a switch reluctantly.

He was finally forced to stop again, sure that he was near now. This time, it was in what seemed to be a major shipping center in the heart of the lines that ran helter-skelter from village to village. Another suspicous-eyed man studied him. "You won't find Aimsworth on his farm—couldn't reach it in that, anyhow," he said finally. Then he turned up his Marspeaker. "Ed! Hey, Ed!"

Down the street, the seal of a building opened, and the big, bluff figure of Aimsworth came out. His eyes narrowed as he spotted Gordon, and then he grinned and waved his visitor forward and back into the building with him.

Inside, there was evidence of food, and a rather pretty girl brought out another platter and set it before Gordon. He ate while they exchanged uncertain, rambling information on friends and the general situation. Finally, he got down to his errand, feeling like a fool. The Mother should have come. Aimsworth had never had any particular use for Gordon, and the man was a weak stick to lean on, unless he was more than just the engineer on the monorail.

Aimsworth shrugged, and seemed to read his mind. "I can get the stuff sent, Gordon. I'm head of the shipping committee for this quadrant. But why in

hell should I? Sure, our stuff is rotting in the tanks, and someday the credits will be good. But the last time we tried shipping to Wayne's group, every car was looted in Outer Marsport. If they won't let us get oil and chemicals we need, why should we feed them?"

"Ever see starvation?" Gordon asked, wishing again someone else who'd felt it could carry the message. He told about the man who'd committed suicide for his kids, not stopping as Aimsworth's face sickened slowly. "Hell, who wouldn't loot your trains if that's going on?"

Aimsworth considered, then shrugged "All right, if Mother Corey'll back up this volunteer police group, maybe. I've got kids of my own . . . Look, you want food, we want to ship. Get your cops to give us an escort for every shipment through to the dome, and we'll drop off one car out of four for the outlands."

Gordon sat back weakly, surprised at the relief that washed over him at the sudden victory. "Done!" he said. "Provided the first shipment carries the most we can get for the credits I brought."

"It will—we've got some stuff that's about to spoil, and we can let you have a whole train of it." He took the sack of credits and tossed it toward a drawer, uncounted. "A damned good thing Security's sending a ship. Credits won't be worth much until they get this mess straightened out."

Gordon felt the hair at the base of his neck tingle at the name, remembering that the kindest reports Security would get of him would be enough to send an angel to hell. But he shrugged it off. "What makes you think Security can do anything? They haven't shown a hand yet."

"They will," Aimsworth said, and there was conviction in his voice. "You guys in Marsport under your own charter feed yourselves so many lies you begin to believe them. But Security took Venus—and I'm not worried here, in the long run. Don't ask me how. All I know is that Security gets results." His voice was a mixture of bitterness and an odd certainty. "They set Security up as a nice little debating society, Gordon, to make it easy for North America to grab the planets by doing it through that Agency. Only they got better men on it than they wanted. So far, Security has played one nation against another enough to keep any from daring to swipe power on the planets. And this latest trick folded up, too. North

America figured on Marsport folding up once they got a police war started with a bunch of chiselling profiteers as their front; they expected the citizens to yell uncle all the way back to Earth. But out here, nobody thinks of Earth as a place to yell to for help, so they missed. And now Security's got Pan-Asia and United Africa balanced against North America, so the swipe won't work. We got the dope from our southern receiver. North America's called it all a mistaken emergency measure and turned it back to Security."

"Along with how many war rockets?" Gordon asked.

"None. They never gave any real power, never will. The only strength Security's ever had comes from the fact that it always wins, somehow. There's just one ship coming, with a group of authorized agents." He studied Gordon, and grunted. "Forget the crooks and crooked cops, man! Ask the people who've been getting kicked around about Security, and you'll find that even most of Marsport doesn't hate it! It's the only hope we've got of not having all the planets turned into colonial empires! You staying over, or want me to give you an engineer and drag car so you can ride back in comfort?"

Gordon stared at the room with almost everything a product of the planet, at Aimsworth, and at the girl and few men who had come in. Here, he supposed, was the real Mars—the men who liked it here, who were independent, and sure of their future. They were clean and hard underneath, and somehow as remote from Earth as the planet itself. There was nothing he could put his finger on—but he stood up slowly. "I'll take the drag car," he decided.

He should have felt pleased to be going back with the job done. But it could have been accomplished by anyone, apparently. And there was no future for him in it. He could always join the police—but volunteer police wouldn't be paid. While trouble lasted, they'd be fed as well as anyone; afterwards, they'd go back to their work. For him, there was nothing to which he could return. He considered Aimsworth's opinion of Security. If it were true, then it could only mean the hell-world of Mercury for him! And anything he did here would be pointless. Look out for number one, he'd told himself. Too bad he hadn't been able to do it.

He found Randolph waiting in a scooter outside the precinct house after he'd reported his results and repeated them fifty times with hope growing weakly

in his listeners' eyes with each telling. He climbed in woodenly, leaving his helmet on as he saw the broken window. "A good job," the little man said. "And news for the paper, if I ever publish it again. I came over because I wasn't much use at the Coop, and everyone else was busy."

"Doing what?" Gordon asked.

Randolph grinned crookedly. "Running outer Marsport. The Mother's the only man everybody knows, I guess—and his word has never been broken that anyone can remember. So he's helping Schulberg make agreements with the sections the volunteers don't handle. Place is lousy with people now. Heard about Mayor Wayne?"

Gordon shook his head, not caring, but the man went on. "He must have had his supply of drugs lifted somehow. He holed up one day, until it really hit him that he couldn't get any more and the jerks were about due. Then he went gunning for Trench with some idea Trench had swiped the stuff. Trench had to shoot him, so he's now running the Municipal section. And I hear the gangs are just about in control of both sections, lately."

They were passing near the dome now, with one of the smaller entrances ahead. Gordon stared at it, noticing that less lights were burning than ever. Out in the frontiers where Aimsworth lived was one Mars. Here, beyond the dome, was another. And inside was still a third. There was no real similarity, except for common misery in the last two. A world, an isolated city, and the sweepings of the city! No wonder hell had popped.

Then he jerked upright as a searchlight lashed out from inside the dome. In it there was caught the figure of a boy of perhaps ten, running wildly, with a small bundle of papers under his arm. And from the side, a man in Legal uniform broke into a run after him, with a ragged bum behind him. Guns were erupting from the holsters of the two men, and the helmetless boy began screaming as bullets whined by.

Gordon was out of the scooter with a single movement, and his own gun bucked in his hands. The Legal dropped. The second shot caught the bum on his helmet, cracking it. He staggered on a few steps, gasping, and then dropped, to die slowly from lack of oxygen.

The kid vanished into a pile of rubble and was gone. The searchlight swung to cover Gordon and the scooter, and there was the thin crack of a rifle. He

ducked back inside, while Randolph hit the throttle, increasing the distance.

"One of my delivery kids," the publisher said quickly. "Probably trying to slip into the dome. Damn it, I've tried to recall all of them from around there, but they keep trying—figure I'll give 'em a bonus if they succeed. And the Legals have been hunting them for a week now! Gordon, you wanted a job. I'll give you one I'll give you five hundred credits a week—real credits, not script—to hunt down any of those devils and their guides!"

"You'd better turn your money over to the volunteers," Gordon told him. He stared back toward the blackness into which the kid had vanished, remembering the gate guard's joking reference to hunting. Then his mind finally realized what his eyes had seen. "That kid—Randolph, he wasn't using a helmet!"

"Third generation. They adapt out here just as well as on the frontier, though nobody has figured out quite how. It's only inside the dome that the kids never develop the ability. Gordon, name your own price!"

Gordon shrugged, and shook his head, not knowing why. The smell of his home slums was in his nose again—but there'd been no cops there who considered it sport to use the kids for target practice! And what could one man do against such guided killers?

The Chicken Coop was filled, as Randolph had said, but he slipped in and up the stairs, leaving the news to the publisher. The place had been cleaned up more than he had expected, and there must have been new plants installed beside the blower, since the air was somewhat fresher, in spite of the sounds that indicated most of the rooms were filled.

He found his own room, and turned in automatically, his head thick and his stomach tautened. He needed sleep first. After that . . .

"Bruce?" A dim light snapped on, and he stared down at Sheila. Then he blinked. His bunk had been changed to a wider one, and she lay under the thin covering on one side. Down the center, crude stitches of heavy cord showed where she had sewed the blanket to the mattress to divide it into two sections. And in one corner, a couple of blanket sections formed a rough screen.

She caught his stare and reddened slowly, drawing the cover up over her more tightly. Her voice was scared and apologetic. "I had to, Bruce. The Coop is full, and they needed rooms—

and I couldn't tell them that . . . that . . ."

"Forget it," he told her. He dropped to his own side, with barely enough room to slide between the bed and the wall, and began dragging off his boots and uniform. She started up to help him, then jerked back, and turned her head away. "Forget all you're thinking, Cuddles. I'm still not bothering unwilling women—and I'll even close my eyes when you dress, if that'll make you feel better."

She sighed and relaxed.

There was a faint touch of humor in her voice. "They called it bundling once, I think. I—Bruce, I know you don't like me, so I guess it isn't too hard for you. But—sometimes . . . Oh, damn it! Sometimes you're—nice!"

"Nice people don't get to Mars. They stay on Earth, being careful not to find out what it's like up here," he told her bitterly. For a second he hesitated, and then the account of the newsboy and his would-be killers came rushing out.

She dropped a hand onto his, nodding. "I know. The Kid—Rusty's friend—wrote down what they did to him."

Gordon grunted. He'd almost forgotten about the tongueless Kid. For a second, his thoughts churned on. Then he got up and began putting on his uniform again. Sheila frowned, staring at him, and began sliding from her side, reaching for her robe. She followed him down the creaking stairs, and to the room where Schulberg, Mother Corey, and a few others were still arguing some detail.

They looked up, and he moved forward, dragging a badge from his pouch. He slapped it down on the table in front of them. "I'm declaring myself in!" he told them coldly. "You know enough about Security badges to know they can't be forged. That one has my name on it, and rating as a Prime—which makes me top Security man on this damned stinking planet. Do you want to shoot me for it, or will you follow orders?"

Randolph picked it up, and fumbled into his pocket, drawing out a tiny badge and comparing them. His eyes were shocked, but he nodded. "I lost connection years ago, Gordon. But this makes you my boss."

"Then give it all the publicity you can, and tell them Security has just declared war on the whole damned dome section! Mother, I want all the dope we found!" With that—about the only supply of any size left—he could command unquestioning loyalty from every addict who hadn't already died from lack

of it. Mother Corey nodded, instant understanding running over his putty-like face. He picked up the badge, shuddered, and then grinned slowly.

Schulberg shrugged. "After your deal with Aimsworth, we'd probably follow you anyhow. But with a Security ship coming, and with this authority—well, I don't cotton to Security, Gordon—but those devils in there are making our kids starve! Okay, I guess outer Marsport's giving up its charter and turning itself in to Security. You name it!"

Mother Corey heaved his bulk up slowly, wheezing, and indicated his chair at the head of the table. But Gordon shook his head. He'd made his decision. His head was emptied for the moment, and he wanted nothing more than a chance to hit the bed and forget the whole business until morning.

Sheila was staring at him as he shucked off his outer clothes mechanically and crawled under the blanket. She let the robe fall to the floor and slid into the bed without taking her eyes off him. "Is it true about Security sending a ship?" she asked at last. He nodded, and her breath caught. "What happens when they arrive, Bruce?"

She was shivering. He rolled over and patted her shoulder. "Who knows? Who cares? I'll see that they know you weren't guilty, though. Stop worrying about it."

She threw herself sideways, as far from him as she could get. Her voice was thick, but muffled in the blanket. "Damn you, Bruce Gordon. I *should* have killed you!"

Gordon turned back to his own side, letting the sting of her words disappear into the chasing circle of his thoughts. But somehow, he felt better. Maybe he was a fool. He'd started fighting for himself on Earth and wound up trying to fight for all humanity; it had gotten him into this. He'd fought for himself here, and the same old drive had caught him up again. Tough, realistic—sure, until he always had to wind up as much a blind, idealistic crusader as Randolph.

But at least he knew what he wanted to do, finally—until Security came. After that . . .

He dropped it from his mind and sleep hit him quickly this time.

XVI

To Gordon's surprise, the publicity Randolph wrote about his being a Security Prime seemed to bring the other sections of outer Marsport under the volunteer police control ever

faster. But he was too busy to worry about it. He left general coordination in the hands of Mother Corey, while Izzy and Schulberg ran the expanding of the police force.

Aimsworth came in with the first load of food, heard about the new delevopment, and came storming up to him. "You dog-gone fool! Why didn't you tell me you were a Security Prime! I'm grade three myself."

"And I suppose that would have meant you'd have shipped in all the food we needed free?" Gordon asked.

The other stopped to think it over. Then he laughed roughly. "Nope. You're right. The growers would starve next year if they gave it all away now. Well, we'll get in enough food this way to keep you going for awhile—couple of weeks, at least."

It sounded good, and might have worked if there had been the normal food reserve, or if the other three quadrants had been willing to do as much. But while the immediate pressure of starvation was lifted, Gordon's own stomach told him that it wasn't an adequate diet. Besides, some of the vitamins the human system needed were lacking from Mars-grown food, and had to be supplied by Earth. The supplies were apparently sitting up on Deimos where the ships had been landed under the ban on shipping to Mars. Signs of scurvy and pellagra were increasing!

Gordon whipped himself into forgetting some of that. His army was growing. Or rather, his mob. There was no sense in trying to get more than the vaguest organization. The addicts came out at the first word for the free drugs their systems now demanded—but over three quarters were already dead, and the others in such pitiful condition that many were unable to bring supplies, as they had been instructed. Then the gate guards were given orders to shoot anyone going out, and most of those remaining died in trying to make it. In the long run, the death of the poor wretches was probably for the good of Mars, Gordon thought—but now it played hell with his plans.

Over a dozen pushers were identified by Izzy the first day, whipped publicly—since jails were a luxury now—and sent back; after that, they gave up.

Gordon recruited as best he could, but Security wasn't popular enough to draw many, other than those so filled with hatred for the domed section that they no longer cared. He shrugged and equipped them as best he

could, trying to decide when the best time would be.

It was the eighth day when he led them out in the early dawn. He had issued extra dope and managed a slight increase in the ration, so they made brave enough a showing, until they reached the dome. Then his failure hit him at once!

There were no rifles opposed to him, as he had expected, and the guard at the gate was no heavier. But the warning had somehow been given, and the two forces were ready. For once, their private war had been forgotten.

Stretching north from the gate were the Municipals with members of some of the gangs; the other gangmen were with the Legals to the south. And they stood within inches of the dome, holding axes and knives.

A big Marspeaker ran out from the gate. It blatted a sour whistle to catch attention, and then the voice of Gannett came over it. "Go back! Go back to your stinking dens, you cannibals! If just one of you gets within ten feet of the dome or entrance, we're going to rip the dome! We'll destroy Marsport before we'll give in to a doped-up riff-raff! You've got five minutes to get out of sight, before we come out with rifles and knock you off! Now beat it!"

Gordon got out of the car the Kid was driving and started toward the entrance, just as the moaning wail of the crowd behind him built up. He took another step, and some of the axes were raised. Then hands were clawing at him, dragging him back.

"You fools!" he yelled. "They're bluffing. They wouldn't dare destroy the dome! Come on!"

But already the men were evaporating. He stared at the rout, and suddenly stopped fighting the hands holding him. Beside him, the Kid was crying, making horrible sounds of it. He turned slowly back to the car, and felt it get under way. His final sight was that of the Legals and Municipals wildly scrambling for cover from each other while one of the gangs began breaking into the gate locker rooms.

Mother Corey met him, dragging him back to a small room where he dug up an impossibly precious bottle of brandy. "Drink it all, cobber. So one of your Security badges had the wrong man attached to it, and word got back. Couldn't be helped. Bound to be some with low badges who didn't own the names on them, but you'd have

been as bad off using anyone else, so don't blame yourself. You just ran into the sacred law of Marsport—the one they teach kids. Be bad, and the dome'll collapse The dome made Marsport, and it's taboo!"

Gordon nodded. Maybe the old man was right. He'd been forced to use the near score of men who claimed Security badges as his nucleus of leadership, and one might have been a traitor. "If the dome gives them a perfect cover, why let me make a jackass of myself, Mother?" he asked numbly.

Corey shook his head, setting the heavy folds of flesh to bouncing. "Gave them something to live for here, cobber. And when you get over this, you're gonna announce new plans to try again. Yes, you are! But right now, you get yourself drunk!"

He left Gordon and the bottle. After awhile, the bottle was gone. It felt number, but no better, by the time Izzy came in.

"Trench is outside in a heavy-armored car, Bruce. Says he wants to see you. Something to discuss—a proposition!"

Sure, Gordon thought—a proposition to surrender, or maybe to use his drug-controlled addicts against the Legals. Trench wasn't in a good position. He stood up, wobbling a little, trying to think. Then he swore, and headed for his room. "Tell him to go to hell!"

He saw Izzy and Sheila leave, wondering vaguely where she had been. Through the opening in the seal, he spotted them moving toward the big car outside. Then he shrugged. He finally made the stairs and reached his bed before he passed out.

Sheila was standing over him when he finally woke. She dumped a headache powder into her palm and held it out, handing him a small glass of water. He swallowed the fast-acting drug, and sat up, trying to remember. Then he wished he couldn't.

"What did Trench want?" he asked thickly.

"He wanted to show you a badge—a security badge made out for him," she answered. "At least he said he wanted to show you something, and it was about that size. He wouldn't talk with us much. But I remember his name in the book—"

Too many details, Gordon thought. He shook his head to clear it, and then grunted at the pain. He sat up, noticing idly that someone had removed his clothes. The book, he thought, trying to focus his thoughts. The book with all the names . . .

"All right, Cuddles," he said

finally. "You got your meal-ticket, and you've outgrown it in this mess. Now I want that damned book! I've been operating in the dark. It's time I found out how to get in touch with some of those people. Where is it?"

She shook her head. "It isn't. Bruce—I don't have it. That time I gave you the note. You didn't come when I said, and I thought you wouldn't. Then Jurgens' men broke in, and I thought they'd get it, so—so I burned it. I lied to you about using it to make you keep me."

"You burned it!" He turned it over, staring at her, suddenly re-remembering all that had happened before his marriage to her. "Okay, Cuddles, you burned it. You were trying to kill me then, so you burned it to keep Jurgens from getting it and putting the finger on me! Where is it, Sheila? On you?"

She backed away, biting her lips. "No, Bruce. I burned it. I don't know why. I just did! No!"

She turned toward the door as he pushed up from the bed, but his arm caught her wrist, dragging her back. She whimpered once, then shrieked faintly as his hand caught the buttons on the dress, jerking them off. Then suddenly she was a writhing, biting, scratching fury, her clawed fingers striking for his eyes, her teeth reaching for his neck.

He tightened his hand and lifted her to the bed, dropping a knee onto her throat and beginning to squeeze, while he jerked the dress and thin slip off.

She sat up as he released his knee, her hoarse voice squeezed from between her writhing lips. "Are you satisfied now, you mechanical beast! Do you still think I have it on me?"

He grinned, twisting the corners of his mouth. "You don't. That I can see, Cuddles. Naughty wife! Don't you know a *wife* shouldn't keep secrets from her *husband?* A warm-blooded, affectionate husband, to boot." He bent down, knocking aside her flailing arms, and pulled her closer to him. "Better tell your husband where the book is, Cuddles!"

She cursed and he drew her closer. His breath caught in his throat as his hands slid over her skin. She was fighting against him, perspiring with the effort, and the scent of her hair and her faintly perfumed skin burned its way down to his lungs. He bent down, forcing her head back and setting his lips on hers.

Then he looked up and managed a final sound of mockery. "To hell with the book, Cuddles,

he said. But there was no mockery inside him—only a hunger that had been held back too long, and a rising clamor of excitement that throbbed through his body. He no longer knew whether she was fighting him or clinging to him. He only knew that she was gathered to him, and that yesterday and tomorrow could never exist.

From somewhere, wetness touched his cheek, and it had no business in the world of overtaut emotions. But it came again. He tried to shake it off, but the cool wetness interfered with his twisted concentration. Finally, he lifted his head and looked down. The wetness came from tears that spilled out of her eyes and ran off onto the mattress. She was making no sound, and there was no resistance, but the tears ran out, one drop seeming to trip over another.

He heaved himself away, and there was a sickness and hollowness through every cell of his body. He caught his aching breath, and sat up, to reach for his clothes.

"All right, Sheila," he said. His voice was cracked in his ears. "Another week of being a failure on this planet of failures, and I might. Go ahead and tell me I'm the same as your first husband. But tell it to me fast, because I'm through bothering you. If I can't even keep my word to you, I can at least get out and stay out." He shook his head, waiting for her denunciation, but she lay quietly. And suddenly there was another bitterness on top of all the ones that had gone before. He laughed roughly at himself. "For your amusement, I'm going to miss having you around!"

He stood up, lifting his leg to the uniform opening. Something touched his hand, and he looked down to see her fingers. His eyes swung slowly, studying her arm, her shoulder, and finally her face, filled with a strange surprise.

"Bruce," she said faintly. "You meant it! You don't hate me any more." She rubbed her wrist across her eyes, and the ghost of a smile touched her lips. "I don't think you're a failure. And maybe—maybe I'm not. Maybe I don't have to be a failure as a woman—a wife, Bruce. I don't want you to go!"

He dropped the uniform slowly and bent toward her, until his arm slid beneath her neck and her lips gradually came up to meet his. There was no savage lurch of animal fire this time, but a slow flood of warmth. She caught her breath and tensed, and his hands were gentle as he released her slowly.

Then she sighed faintly, and pulled him back, while the warmth seemed to spread from him to her, until it was a shared and precious thing, and they were one in it.

He stared down at her later. She lay sleeping, with the faint smile still tucked in the corner of her mouth. Vaguely, he could understand why she might have burned the book as she claimed. They had been as separate worlds as inner and outer Marsport, held apart by a dome that neither dared to break. But under it all, they had been the same, and the drive toward completion had always operated before one could harm the other.

He sighed, wishing the two Marsports could have the same protection against mutual ruin. Two worlds. One huddled under its dome, forever afraid of losing the protection and having to face the life the other led; and yet driven to work together or to perish together. The sacred dome!

And suddenly he was sitting up, shaking her. "The dome! It has to be the answer! Cuddles, you broke the chain enough for me to think again! We've been blind—the whole damned planet has been blind."

She blinked and then frowned. "Bruce—"

"I'm all right! I'm just half sane instead of all insane for a change." He got up, pacing the floor as he talked and as the truth of his idea began to drive itself home.

"Look, most of the people here are Martians. They've left Earth behind, and they're meeting this planet on its own terms. And they're adapting. Third generation children—not all, but a lot of them—are breathing the air we'd die on, and they're doing fine at it. Probably second generation ones can keep going after we'd pass out. It's just as true out here as it is on the frontier. But Marsport has that sacred dome over it. It's still trying to be Earth. And it can't do it. It sits huddled in terror, ripe for the plucking of anyone who will keep the dome going. It has never had a chance to adjust here, and it's afraid to try."

"Maybe," she agreed doubtfully. "But what about this part of Marsport?"

"Obvious. Here, they grow up under the shadow of it. They live in a half-world. There inside the dome, save by the mace of God, live I. There, with luck, I'll move. They even worship the thing, because it's a symbol they might barely have a chance to live a sheltered life again. They've been infected. And

they have to live on the crumbs the dome tosses them. What we need is to break through, and there's only one way to do it! Fix it so they're all on the same level, so they can live together like people again, not like slave and master—and so they'll have to face the world they're living on. Sheila, if something happened to that dome . . ."

"We'd be killed," she said. "How do we do it?"

He frowned, and then grinned slowly. "Maybe not!"

They spent the rest of the night discussing it. Sometime during the discussion, she made coffee, and first Randolph, then the Kid came in for briefing. Randolph was a natural addition, and the Kid had been alternately following Gordon and Sheila around since he'd first heard they were fighting against the men who'd robbed him of his right to speak. In the end, as the night spread into day, there were more people than they felt safe with, and less than they needed. Rusty and Izzy, who argued hotly against it until finally convinced, and then settled down to conviction in the rightness of it that was greater even than Gordon's.

He could feel something boiling inside him that hadn't been there since the day back on Earth when he'd found out that the head of one of the most vicious dope rings was a leading Congressman and had written his column on it—the one that got him the only prize he'd ever valued.

But later, as he stood beside the dome when night had fallen again, he wasn't so sure. It was huge. The fabric of it was thin, and even the webbing straps that gave it added strength were frail things. But it was strong enough to hold up the pressure of over ten pounds per square inch, and the webbing was anchored in a metal sleeve that went too high for cutting. They could rip it, but not ruin it completely; and it had to be done so that no repair could ever be made. Once gone, the expense of putting up another would be too great for the fraying economy of the city.

Under it, and anchoring it, was a concrete wall all around the city.

Behind them lay the wild lands of outer Marsport, with ugly hulks and wrecks of buildings showing faintly in the weak light. Inside, the city was mostly silent, except for a few cops who patrolled, watching for enemies, or petty crooks who were out boldly, unmindful of the cops.

Izzy came back from a care-

ful exploration. "We can work enough powder under those webbing supports, and lay the fuse wire beside the plastic ring that keeps it airtight," he reported. "But God help us, gov'nor, if any gee spots us. They'd made a bloody mess of us in no time."

They worked through the night, while Rusty went back to requisition more explosives from the dwindling supply, and while the Kid and Izzy took time off to break into a closed converter plant and find wire enough to connect the charges. But dawn caught them with less done than they had hoped. Gordon went to connect a wire and switch from the battery and coil they had installed, but jerked backwards as he saw a suspicious guard staring at him.

"Let him think we're just scouting," Randolph advised. The man's limp was worse, and he was dead with fatigue, but he had refused to complain. "You'll have to return tonight and connect it. And maybe we can run the mines a bit further. I don't know whether that will be enough or not. I wish we had an engineer."

"It'll do, I guess," Izzy said as they got into the small truck and headed back. "Only thing that bothers me is that no matter how much you lay a cover, gov'nor, somebody's gonna put the finger on you for sure."

Gordon shrugged. It couldn't be helped. Anyhow, it didn't matter so much now. With the real Security on the way, his time was being counted in the present tense only. The important thing was to get the dome down, and he had blanketed his mind to everything else.

There were suspicious looks as the group came back to the Coop, but Mother Corey waddled over to meet them. "Did you find them, cobber?" he asked quickly, and one of his eyelids flickered.

Izzy answered before Gordon could rise to it. "Not yet, Mother. May have to go back tonight."

Gordon left them discussing the mythical search for certain supplies that Mother Corey had apparently used as an alibi for their absence from the building. Sheila started to make coffee, but he shook his head, and headed for the bed. She yawned and nodded, fingering the stitches that still ran down the blanket to divide it. Then she grimaced faintly and dropped down beside him on top of the blanket. Her head hit his arm, and she seemed to be asleep almost at once.

He lay there, twisting it about in his mind. The lift had

gone, now, and there were only doubts left. The men inside the dome had their drills to seek cover, but that was only from a rent in the dome that would produce a comparatively gradual leak. This would be a wild rush of air that would strip the inside of the city down to Mars-normal in bare seconds. He had no idea of the amount of wind there would be, nor whether there would be time, in such wild fury, for men to seek cover.

Twice he turned over to wake Sheila and tell her it was all off. But both times he couldn't go through with it. If it worked, it would be worth a little death. Randolph had told him he was good for only murder and killing. Maybe it was true. But if he had to spend his life at such fighting, he might as well make it pay off.

Rule books, he thought! Whaler and his willingness to die for what he believed. The old man and his wife who had run the liquor store, and who had never had a chance on this cockeyed world. He wondered vaguely whether their bodies had ever been found, and whether they'd had a decent burial.

Then he looked down at Sheila's face. Some day she'd have children, now. Probably not his children. He thought of that, and it hurt a little. Sure, maybe it was just his slum background where men had always pauperized themselves to have fine strong sons to support them in their age—in spite of social insurance, the old ideas still stuck in such places. And the sons ran off and forgot their parents in trying to have enough sons for their future! Or maybe it was just a drive that was built into all men. He'd always felt a touch of jealousy when he saw other men with kids.

But it didn't matter. She'd be having children here on this planet, and they had a right to better things than she had found here. And their children would be Martians, able to meet the world on its own terms, and breathe its atmosphere unaided.

It had to be right.

The same thought was still in his mind when he awoke to find Izzy shaking his shoulder. He looked down for Sheila, but she was gone. Izzy followed his eyes, and shook his head.

"The princess took off in a car three hours ago," he said. "She said it was something that had to be done, gov'nor, so I figured you'd know about it."

He shrugged, and let it pass. The little fool had probably gone ahead to get things ready.

He found the rest of the group ready, with Mother Corey wishing them better luck tonight. The Mother obviously knew something, though he wasn't supposed to be in on it. But he kept his suspicions to himself, and gave them a cover from the others.

There was no sign of Sheila near the dome. But inside, there were guards pacing along it. Gordon spotted them first, and drew the others back. If they'd found the carefully worked-in powder . . .

The Kid ducked down and out of the car, worming his way around the building that concealed them. He waited for the guard to vanish, and then went crawling forwards. Gordon swore, but there was no sense in two of them risking themselves, only to attract more attention. And at last the Kid came back. He ducked into the truck, nodding.

"Wire and explosive still there?" Gordon asked.

The Kid made the sound he used for assent.

It made no sense. If they had been betrayed, or if the explosive had been found, there should be proof of it in the removal of the danger. But without something like that, there was no reason for the sudden vigilance inside the dome.

"We might be able to run the wire in," Izzy said doubtfully.

Gordon grunted. "And tip them off where it is, probably. No, we'll have to do it under some kind of covering, the way I had it planned in the first place, only with one more damned complication. We'll pull another false raid on the dome. As soon as we get chased off, I'll manage to set it off while they are relaxing and laughing at us."

"It smells!" Izzy told him. "Who elected you chief martyr around here? You'll be blown up, gov'nor—and if you ain't, they'll rip you to ribbons for knocking off the dome."

Then he stopped suddenly, staring. Gordon leaned forward, with Izzy's hands grabbing for him. But he'd seen it too.

Standing next to the dome was Trench, talking to one of the guards. And beside him stood Sheila, with one hand resting on the man's elbow!

For a second, Gordon stared. Then he dropped back onto the seat. Well, he'd had warning. She'd seen Trench on his phoney negotiation deal—had probably given him the book she was supposed to have burned. And she'd gone the limit in worming information out of him for her new meal-

ticket—a lot more than they'd expected.

He could feel the thickness of the silence and misery in the truck, but he pushed it away, with all the other things. "Get us back, Izzy," he ordered. "We've got to round up whatever group we can and get them back here on the double. They must be counting on our original time, so they're in no hurry to remove the powder and wiring. But we can't count on any more time."

"You're going through with it?" Randolph asked doubtfully.

"In one hour. And you might pass the word along that we're doing it to save the dome. Tell the men we just found out that Trench is losing, and intends to blow it up instead of letting the Legals win."

Rumor would travel fast enough, he hoped. And it should give him a few extra seconds before his forces cracked.

He lifted the switch in his hands and stared at it. It wasn't necessary now. All he had to do was to reach the battery and drop any metal across the two terminals there . . . if they could get back before Trench—and Sheila—could remove the battery.

It was a period of complete fog to him. He knew he must have issued orders and been the cold figure of command in person. He had a blurred memory of dragging men up and setting them to arousing others, of spreading the story about the dome, and hearing it come back to him in curiously twisted forms

But it wasn't until his motley army reached the dome, straggling up in trucks and on foot, that he snapped into focus again. There was no sign of Sheila this time, and he didn't look for her. His whole mind was concentrated down to a single point. Get the dome, get the dome, get the dome . . .

This time, there was no scattering of Municipals and Legals. The Municipal forces were rushing up toward the dome, and surprised Legals were frantically arriving in trucks. There was the beginning of a pitched battle right at the spot where Gordon needed his own cover.

It made no sense to him, and he didn't care. He marched his men up, with the thin wailing of a banshee in his ears. If they wanted to fight inside the dome at this spot, it was all to the good.

"Dome warning!" Izzy shouted in his ear. "Hear that siren, gov'nor? Means they're scared we may do it—and that our own men will believe every bit of

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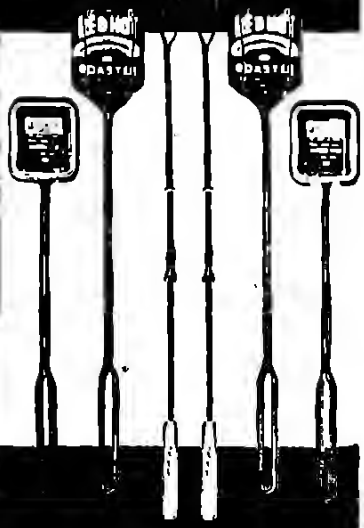

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guff they've been fed. Give me that damned switch!"

He grabbed for it, but Gordon held firmly to the copper strap. And now the men inside caught sight of the approaching force. For a second, consternation seemed to reign.

Then a huge truck with a speaker on top drove into the struggling group, and the thin whisper of unintelligible words reached Gordon. The whole development made no more sense than any part of it to him, but he saw the Municipals and Legals suddenly begin to turn as a single man to face the outside menace that had crept up on them while they were boiling into a fight.

And suddenly the Marspeaker over the entrance blasted into life. "Get back! The dome is mined! Any man coming near it, and it'll blow! Get back! The dome is mined!"

By Gordon's side, a sudden gargling sound came from the Kid. His hand snaked out, caught the strap from Gordon's hand, and jerked it free. Then he was running frantically forward.

Rifles lifted inside, and shots rang out, clipping bullets through the dome. In one place it began to tear, and there was a sudden savage roar from the men around Gordon. He had started forward after the Kid, but Izzy was in front of him, holding him back.

The Kid stumbled and slid across the ground, while blood spurted out from a gash across his head, and the helmet fell into pieces. Then, with a jerk, he was up. His hand reached out, the strap hit the terminals . . .

And where the dome had been, a clap of thunder seemed to take visible form. The webbing straps broke, and the dome jerked upwards, twisting outwards, and then falling into ribbons. The shock wave hit Gordon, knocking him from his feet into the crowd around him.

He struggled to his feet to see helmetted men pouring out of the houses around, and other men pouring forward from his own group. The few of either police force still standing and helmetted broke into a wild run, but they had no chance! The mob had decided that they had mined and exploded the dome, and knives were forgotten in the frenzy of crazed mob vengeance that shook them.

He turned back toward the Coop, sick with the death of the Kid and the bloody violence. For once, he'd had more than his fill of it. He stumbled, heading back blindly.

Then a small truck drew up, and an arm went out to draw

him inside the cab. He stared into the face of Isiah Trench. And driving the truck was Sheila.

"Your wife took a helluva chance, Gordon," Trench said heavily. "And I took quite a one too, to set this up so nobody could ever believe you were behind it. Getting that fight started in time, after you first showed up—oh, sure, we spotted you—was the toughest job I ever did! But I guess she had the roughest end, not even knowing for sure where I stood."

Gordon stared at them slowly, not quite believing it, even though it was no crazier than anything during the last few hours.

Trench shrugged. "I was railroaded here by Security, told to be good and they'd let me go home. A lot of men got that treatment. So when Wayne was still talking about building a perfect Marsport, I joined up. He treated me right, and I took orders. But a man gets sick of working with punks and cheap hoods; he gets sicker of killing off a planet he's learned to like. I learned to take orders, though —and I took them until Wayne tried to put a bullet through me. That ended that, and I came out to join up with you. You were soused, I hear—but your wife guessed enough to take the chance of coming to me when she thought you were going to get yourself killed. Well, I guess you get out here."

He indicated the Coop. Gordon got down, followed by Sheila as Trench took the wheel. "What happens to you now?" Gordon asked. "They'll be blaming you for the end of the dome."

"Let them. I planned on that. Too bad Isiah Trench got torn to bits by the mob, isn't it? And it's a good thing I've always kept myself a place under a safe incognito out in the sticks. Got a wife and two kids out there that even Wayne didn't know about." He stuck out a hand. "You're like Security, Gordon. You do all the wrong things, but you get the right results. Goodbye!"

Sheila watched him go, shaking her head. "He likes you, Bruce. But he can't say it. Men!"

"Women!" Gordon answered.

Then he stiffened. Coming down through the thin air of Mars was the bright blue exhaust of a rocket. The real Security was arriving!

XVII

It was three days before Gordon made up his mind to

hunt up Security, since they seemed to be playing a cat and mouse game with him. Then another four days passed after they had sent him back to wait until they received orders from Headquarters for him. There was a man coming from Earth on a second ship who would see him. They gave him a chauffeur back to the Chicken Coop, politely indicated that it would be better if he stayed within reach, and left him to bite his nails in the dead old building.

The dome had been down a full week when he watched the last of Randolph's equipment packed onto a truck and hauled away. The little publisher was back at the *Crusader* again. Rusty was busy opening his bar, and the others were all busy. Only Gordon and Sheila were left, and she'd stuck on with him here only because of her strange loyalty, he suspected. Maybe he should have gone back to Mother Corey's other house. But he'd started here at the Coop and he meant to finish in the same place.

He heard her coming down the old stairs, and ducked out through the private exit, snapping his helmet in place as he went through the seal. She must have sensed his desire to be left alone, since she made no attempt to follow. She'd been better than the others since Security had landed. She'd asked no questions and hadn't even tried to convince him that he'd be sent back to Earth now.

He muttered to himself as he headed over the rubble toward the previously domed section. He knew better than to have hopes now. It would have been simple for them to accept him on a temporary *de facto* basis as a Security agent, if there had been any doubt in their minds. They'd been sweeping in all the other minor agents and using them. And, after all, one way or another, he had cracked their problem for them.

But now the killing and fighting were finished, and they wanted clerks to run their errands. They were having no part in the blood and the violence that had put them in the saddle here. They'd taken over the beginnings of rule he'd established under the Security name, but they'd left him outside, to cool his heels.

He saw a man come running across the rubble, shouting. Gordon's hand dropped to where the gun had been, and his legs tensed for a leap. Then he grimaced as the man went on, yelling at a bunch of kids climbing out of an old building.

Out at the spaceport, ships were dropping down from Dei-

mos with the supplies that had been held up so long, and a long line of trucks went snaking by. Credit had been established again, and the businesses were open. Here and there, men were coming out of the old ruins, heading toward the barbershops or the taverns, indicating some credits in their pockets again.

A group of young punks outside one of the ruins were busy shooting craps, and one was making motions with a knife. Then a man with the armband of the volunteer police came around the corner, yelling at them. Sullenly, they broke up and began heaving the rubble into a truck to be hauled away.

For the time being, the hoods and punks were having a tough time of it, with working papers demanded as constant identification. And while it lasted, at least, Marsport was beginning to have its face lifted. Wrecks were being broken up, with salvageable material used for newer homes. Gordon came to a row of temporary bubbles, individual-dwellings built like the dome, but opaque for privacy.

Hunger still marked the kids playing around them, but it was a taint from the past, with none of the gaunt fear that had been in their eyes before.

As Gordon drew closer to the old foundation of the dome, the feeling around began to clarify into something half-way between what he had seen on the real frontier and what he had known as a kid in Earth's slums.

Then he passed into the former enclosed section. Momentum still carried it along better than the outer part of the city, and conditions were still an improvement over the outer slums. But there was an uncertainty and clumsiness here, opposed to the rising confidence he had seen further out. People were still adjusting to the lack of an artificially maintained atmosphere around them.

They had been lucky. The dome had exploded outwards, with only bits of it falling back; and the buildings had come through the outward explosion of the pressure with little damage. Some of the people showed their good luck, while others moved about with traces of the numbed despair that had replaced their brief fury. But generally there was a realization that the days of the dome were over, and that men had to go on.

At least, there was now one government. Gordon grinned wryly. Schulberg's volunteers were official, now. Izzy was acting as chief of police, Schulberg was head of the reconstruction corps, and Mother Corey was temporary Mayor of all Mars-

port. The old charter for Marsport from North America was dead, and the whole city was now under Security charter, like the rest of the planet. But the dozen Security men had left most of the control in the Mother's hands, and the old man was up to his fat jowls in business.

Gordon moved automatically toward the Seventh Ward. There was no use heading toward the Municipal Building. The friends he had had were busy, and they had no time for a man without a planet or a job!

He was only good for fighting —and for the time being, fighting was over here.

Fats' Place was still open, though the crooked tables had been removed. Dice and cards were still in use, but it seemed to be penny-ante stuff.

Gordon dropped to a stool, slipping off his helmet. He reached automatically for the glass of ether-needled beer. This time, it even tasted good to him. Maybe it was time he was getting off the damned planet—even to the mines of Mercury! Then he spat and reached for his purse to order another beer.

"On the house, copper," Fats' voice said. The man dropped to another stool, rolling dice casually between his thumbs. "And bring out a steak, there! You look as if you could stand it—and Fats don't forget old friends!"

"Friends and other things," Gordon said, remembering his first visit here. "Maybe you should have got me that night, Fats."

The other shrugged. "That's Mars." He rolled the dice out, then picked them up again. "Guess I'll have to stick to selling meals, mostly—for awhile, at least. Somebody told me you'd joined Security and got banged up trying to keep Trench from blowing up the dome. Thought you'd be in the chips!"

"That's Mars," Gordon echoed the other's comment. He studied the plate in front of him and fell to, more from politeness than hunger. "Why don't you pull off the planet, Fats? You could go back to Earth, I'd guess."

The other nodded. "Yeah. I went back, about ten years ago. There'd been a little trouble back there, but I squared it. Sold out, packed up, and away I went. Spent four weeks down there. I dunno. Guess a man gets used to anything . . . Hell, maybe I won't make as much here, now—but if we get a half-way decent government, without all the graft, I'll net more. Figure maybe I can hire some bums to sit around and whoop it up

when the ships come in, and bill this as a real old Martian den of sin! Get a barker out at the port, run special buses, charge the suckers a mint for a cheap thrill."

Gordon grinned wryly, remembering the drummer he'd met on the trip here. Fats would probably make more than ever.

He finished the meal, accepted a pack of the Earth cigarettes that sold at a luxury price here, and went out into the thin air of Mars.

He moved down the street woodenly, almost missing a sudden hail from one of the women's houses. Then a hand was plucking at his arm and he swung around to see Hilda.

"Hey, cop! Don't you speak no more?"

"What—?" he began.

But she grinned. "Oh, they freed us all from our contracts—first thing they done! So I came down here right off. Dutchesses treat me like I was a real swell—caught on just like that! You should come inside. They got rugs on the floor!" Then her face sobered suddenly, taking on almost its old look. "Hey, what ever happened to Sheila? A real queen, she was! She—"

"I married her," he told the girl.

She blinked, and then laughed. "Well, whatta ya know? Oh, oh!" A whistle had sounded from the house, and she swung back. "Somebody wants to see me. That's my whistle. So long, cop—and you tell Sheila I was askin' for her!"

He nodded and turned out toward the Coop again.

It had been instructive, at least. He knew how important he was, now. Marsport was rebuilding into its new life, and the old elements were being forgotten, unless they fitted in. Fats would feed him, and a few people would remember his face and talk to him—until the business of living took them away again. But the city was no longer interested in iron cops from its past.

It was almost good to get out into the filth of the slums, and be heading back to the still-standing monument of the old Chicken Coop. He headed for the private entrance out of habit, and then shrugged as he realized it was a needless precaution now. He moved up the front steps and through the battered seal.

Then he stopped. Security had finally gotten around to him, it seemed. Inside the hallway, the Security man who'd first sent him to Mars was waiting.

There was a grin on the oth-

er's face. "Hello, Gordon. Finally got our orders for you. It's Mercury!"

Gordon nodded slowly. "All right. I suppose you know I ruined the dome, was supposed to have killed Whalen, pretended I was a Security agent . . ."

"You *were* one," the man said. He grinned again. "We know about Whaler, and we know where Trench is—but he's a good citizen now, so he can stay there. We're not throwing the book at you, Bruce. Damn it, we sent you here to get results, and you got them. We sent twenty others the same way—we couldn't operate legally here under the charter—and they failed. It's the chances we had to take. You were a bit drastic—that I have to admit—but we are one step closer to keeping nationalism off the planets, and that's all we care about."

"I wonder if it's worth it," Gordon said slowly. It had been a heavy question on his mind.

The other shook his head. "We can't know in our lifetime. All we can do is to hope. We'll probably get this Mother Corey and Isaacs elected properly; and for awhile, things will improve. But there'll be pushers as long as weak men turn to drugs, and graft as long as voters allow the thing to get out of their hands. Let's say you've shifted some of the misery around a bit, and given them a chance to do better. It's up to them to take it or lose it. But it was a damned fine job, anyway."

"So I get sent to Mercury?"

"You can't stay here. They'll find out too much eventually." He paused, estimating Gordon. "You can go back to Earth, Bruce. But you won't like it now. You're a fighter. And there's hell brewing on Mercury—worse than here. We've got permission to send you there, if you'll go. With a yellow ticket, again—but without any razzle-dazzle this time. The only thing you'll get out of it is a chance to fight for a better chance for others some day—and a promise that there'll be more, until you get old enough to sit at a desk on Earth and fight against every bickering nation there to keep the planets clean. But I think you'll go. In fact, there's a rocket waiting to transship you to the Moon on the way to Mercury right now."

Gordon sighed. "All right," he said at last. "But I wish you'd tell my wife sometime that . . . Well, that I didn't just run off on her. She's had bad luck with men."

"She already knows," the Security man said. "I've been waiting for you quite awhile, you know. And I've paid her the

pay we owe you from the time you began using your badge. She's out shopping!"

He stalled in the room, not wanting to believe it. But there was no sign of her. And finally he convinced himself that it was best not to have to go through any nonsense of good-byes. Gordon took one last look around the room, staring at the thread still down the middle of the blanket. He caught it savagely, ripping it out, and then went down to the waiting car.

Marsport lay behind him, except for the lonely ride to the rocket field. And that was better, too. His Earth background seemed far away, and this was suddenly home.

The car pulled up to the waiting rocket, and the Security man helped him up the steps with a perfunctory wish for good luck. Then Gordon stopped as great arms surrounded him.

Mother Corey was immaculate, though not much prettier. But his old eyes were glinting. "Did you think we'd let you go without seeing you off, cobber?" he asked. "And after I took a *bath* to celebrate? I . . .I . . . Oh, drat it, I'm getting old. Izzy, you tell him."

He grabbed Gordon's hand and waddled down the landing plank. Izzy shook his head.

"I can't say it, either, gov'nor —but someday, I'm going to have one of those badges myself. Like I always said, honesty sure pays, even if it kills you. Here!"

He followed Mother Corey, leaving behind his favorite knife and a brand-new deck of reader cards, marked exactly as the ones Gordon had first used.

Gordon dropped into his seat, while the sounds outside indicated take-off time. He had less than a hundred credits, a knife, a deck of phoney cards, and a yellow ticket. Mars was leaving him what he'd brought, and no more.

She dropped into the seat very quietly, but her blouse touched his arm. In her hand was a punched ticket with the orange of Mars on top and the black of Mercury on the bottom.

"Hello, Bruce," Sheila said softly. "I've been shopping and I spent all the money the man gave me. This is all I have left. Do you think it's worth it? Or should I take it back?"

He turned it over in his hands slowly, and the smile came back to his face gradually.

"You got a bargain, Cuddles," he said. "A lot better than the mealticket you bought. Let's keep it."

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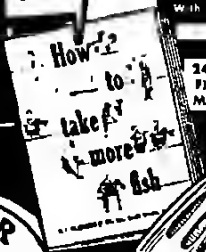

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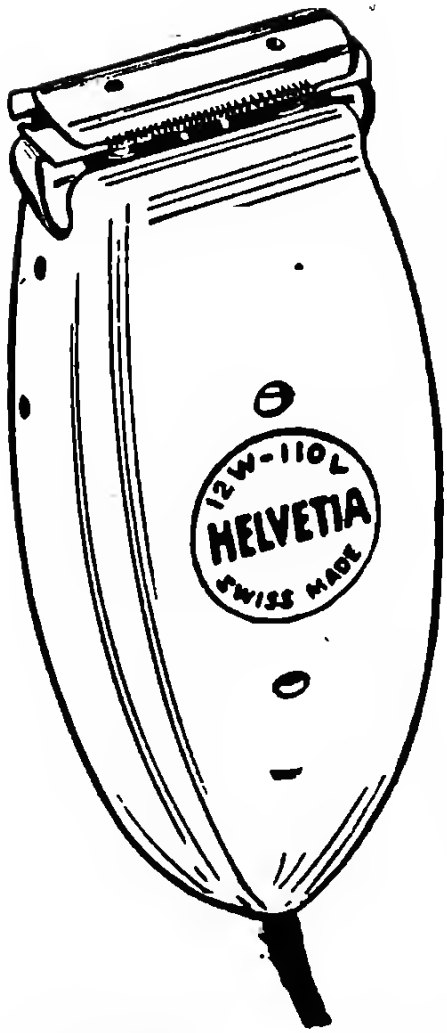

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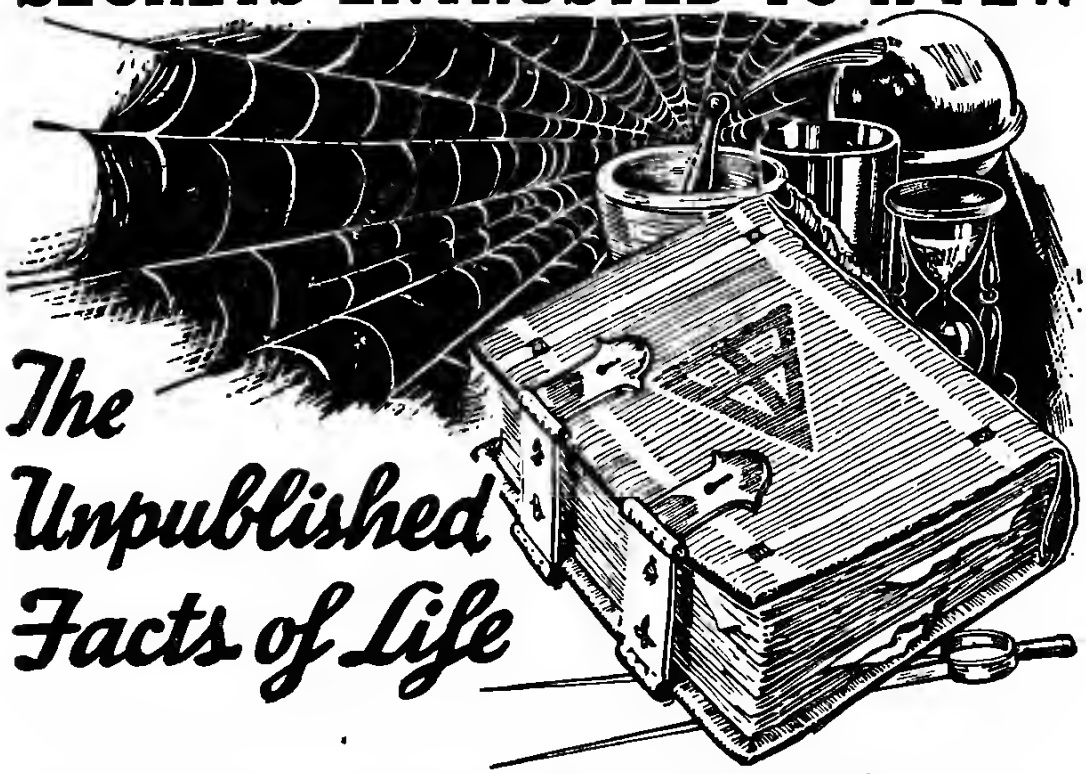

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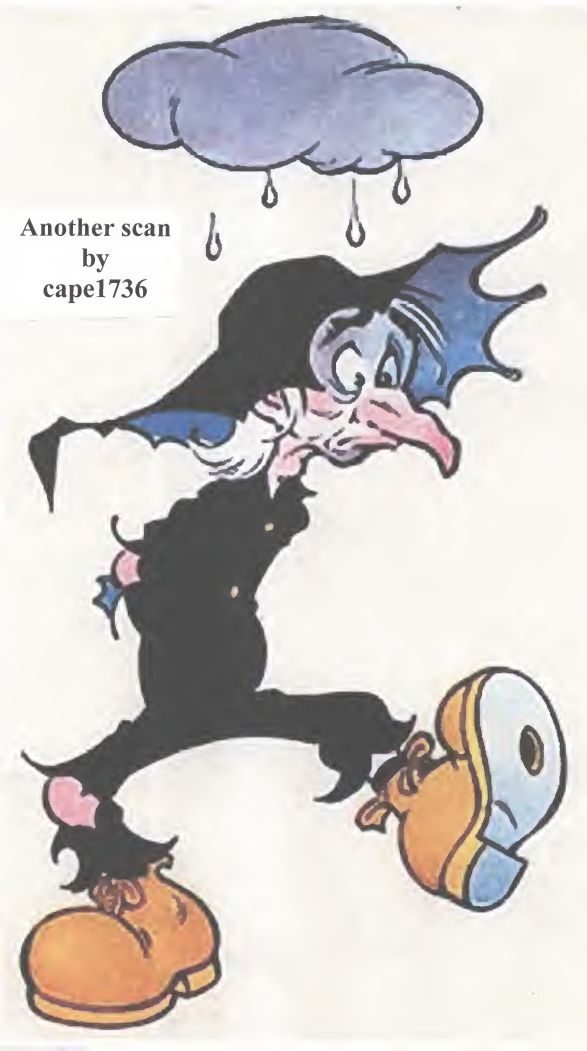
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